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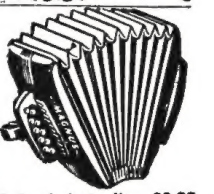

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COMPLETE NOVEL

The Rider of the Ruby Hills

By Jim Mayo

Equipped with magical six-gun speed and iron nerves, Ross Haney embarks on a daring campaign for justice and braves jeopardy with a smile as he enters a valley of sinister discord! 9

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You know times have changed a lot in the past fifty years, but why shouldn't they? The world is moving forward, progressing, and with progress comes more competition, and while competition should be friendly and not upset any of our social customs, it sometimes does.

I remember, back years ago when travelers who were passing a ranchhouse, if they were hungry, and there was no one at home, felt perfectly free to go into the ranch house, cook one or as many meals as was necessary, eat, sleep and rest, and leave a note thanking their absent host for his hospitality. It's different today. Usually, when one leaves a home either in the city or in the country one locks it tight, but thank goodness, the old time hospitality still prevails at meal time at either ranchhouse or chuck wagon. Just drop by at meal time, and you will always get an invitation to eat.

The 1949 Season

The 1949 rodeo season is getting under way in nice shape. Most of the rodeos so far during the season seem to have been successful. The leading producers, Everett Colborn, Col. Jim Eskew, Harry Rowell, Leo Cremer, Verne Elliott, Beutler Brothers, The Roberts Rodeo, and many others, seem to have a full season of shows lined up or being lined up, and the season looks good.

Ken Roberts, of the Roberts Rodeo, seems to have quite a lineup of shows for the season, and this proves that he was a pretty busy fellow during January and February as the country around Strong City, Kansas, Ken's home, was hard hit by blizzards, and Ken was so busy looking after his stock and trying to keep it from freezing that he did did not have time to get out for booking or playing rodeos either.

Col. Jim Eskew had a deal all cooked up with the Arena Managers that would have put his rodeo into several of the big indoor arenas of the eastern U. S. and about three of the indoor arenas in Canada, but the deal fell through at signing time. It is said that he has a nice string of outdoor arenas booked, however, and will have a pretty full season. The indoor rodeo in connection with the Fat Stock Show at Fort Worth, Texas, was well attended despite the bad weather that was encountered.

Verne Elliott was the producer. Troy Fort won the calf roping, George Yardley the steer wrestling, Bill Linderman the saddle bronc riding, Bob Maynard the bareback bronc riding, and Wag Blessing the bull riding.

Standing of Contestants

The standing of the contestants in the season's title race in the Rodeo Cowboys Association point award system, according to the latest compilation which does not take in all the rodeos given thus far, shows many of the contestants getting into the big money bracket early in the season.

Points are based on the amount of prize money won, a dollar of prize money won being counted as one point in the tabulation, and the contestant winning the greatest number of points in any particular event which means winning the most money during the season, is the champion of that event. The all around championship title goes to the biggest money winner of the season—that is, the contestant winning the

most points in any and all events he enters.

For the all around title Troy Fort is leading with 6,947 points, Bill Linderman is in second place with 5,637 points, Homer Pettigrew is third with 4,497 points, Sonny Edwards is fourth with 4,447 points, and Harry Tompkins is fifth with 3,565 points. Ten of the contestants each won more than three thousand dollars in the first three months of the year.

Harry Tompkins is leading for the bull riding title with 3,268 points, Sonny Lavender is second with 2,697 points, Wag Blessing is third with 2,320 points, Gerald Roberts is fourth with 1,927 points and David Shellenberger is fifth with 1,618 points.

Tater Decker is out in front in the bareback bronc riding with 2,020 points, Duncan Brown is second with 1,547 points, Jack Buschbaum is third with 1,580 points, Buck Rutherford is fourth with 1,282 points, and Bill Walker is fifth with 1,257 points.

Barney Willis is leading the field of steer wrestlers with 2,572 points, Todd Whatley is second with 1,700 points, George Yardley is third with 1,591 points, Bill Linderman is fourth with 1,321 points, and B. H. Tucker is fifth with 1,292 points.

Troy Fort leads the calf roping title seekers with 6,947 points, Sonny Edwards is second with 4,447 points, Homer Pettigrew is third with 4,445 points, Jack Skipworth is fourth with 3,060 points and Toots Mansfield is fifth with 2,612 points.

Bill Linderman leads the saddle bronc riders with 3,275 points, Bud Linderman is second with 3,112 points, Bill McMacken is third with 2,599 points, Ross Dollarhide is fourth with 1,641 points and Bill Weeks is fifth with 1,195 points.

Eddie Schell leads the team ropers with 837 points, Tommy Rhodes is second with 627 points, John Rhodes is third with 522 points, Gilbert Nichols is fourth with 405 points and Asbury Schell is fifth with 392 points. The reason for the low score of points in team roping is that it is not a regular event at all rodeos, but is put on at just a few of the western shows.

News of Rodeo Folks

The newly-elected representatives of the Rodeo Cowboys Association took office April 1, and will hold office till the same time in 1950. They are—for steer wrestling, Eddie Curtis; saddle bronc riding, Gene Pruett;

(Continued on Page 120)

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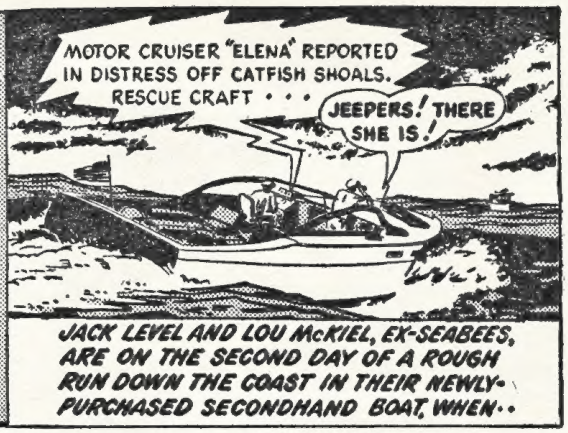
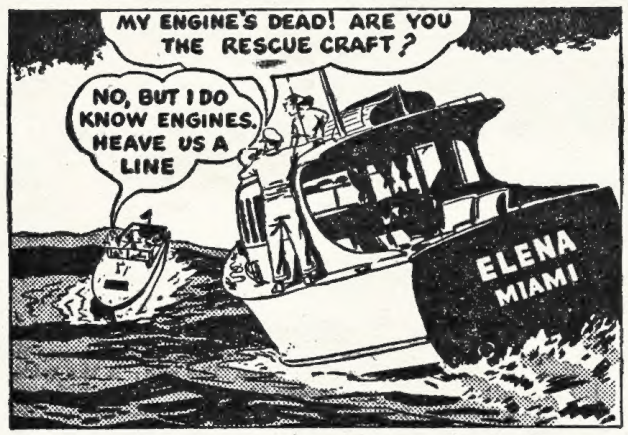
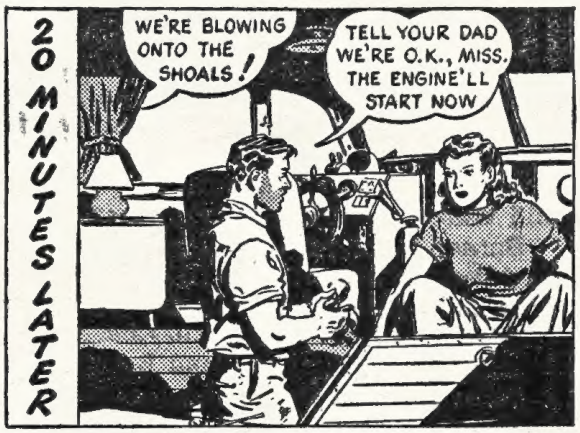


JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED SECONDHAND BOAT, WHEN..





WE PLAN TO FIX UP OUR TUB AND START A FISHING SERVICE
THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT. MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU
HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME

TAKE IT FROM ME, MEN, YOU GET SWELL-LOOKING, COMFORTABLE SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES.
ASK FOR THEM IN THE CONVENIENT NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE.
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
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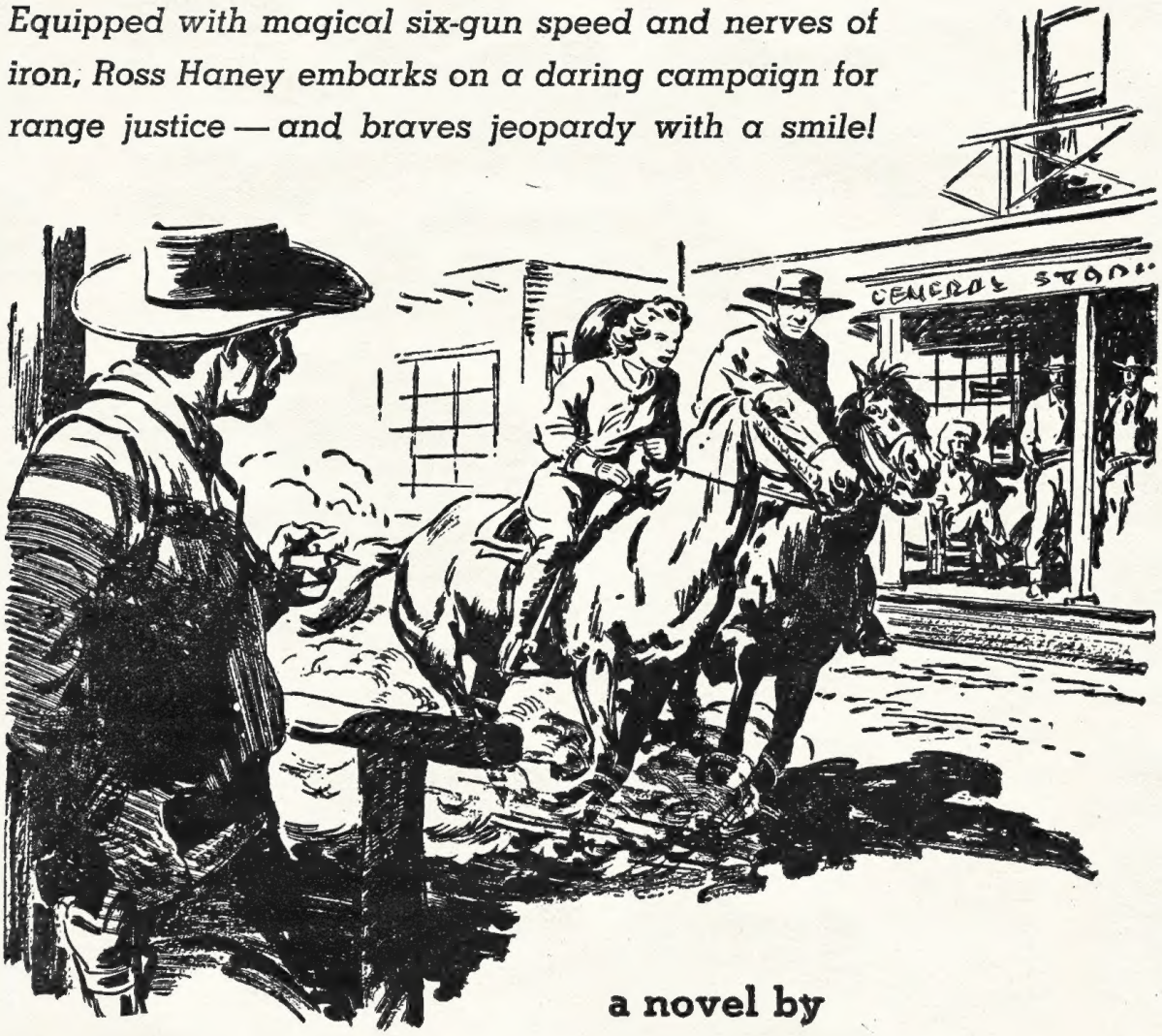
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

THE RIDER of the RUBY HILLS

Equipped with magical six-gun speed and nerves of iron, Ross Haney embarks on a daring campaign for range justice — and braves jeopardy with a smile!



a novel by

JIM MAYO

CHAPTER I

Losing Bet

THERE was a lonely place where the trail ran up to the sky. It turned sharply left on the very point of a lofty promontory overlooking the long sweep of the valley below. Here the trail offered to the passerby a vision at this hour. Rosy tipped peaks and distant purple mountains could be seen, beyond the far reach of the tall grass range.

Upon the very lip of the rocky shelf

A Solitary Horseman Drifts into a Valley of

sat a solitary horseman. He was a man tall in the saddle, astride a strangely marked horse. Its head was held high, its ears were pricked forward with attention riveted upon the valley, as though in tune with the thoughts of its rider. Thoughts that said there lay a new country, with new dangers, new rewards and new trails.

The rider was a tall man, narrow hipped and powerful of chest and shoulder. His features blunt and rugged, so that a watcher might have said, "Here is a man who is not handsome, but a fighter." Yet he was good looking in his own hard, confident way. He looked now upon this valley as Cortez might have looked upon the Valley of Mexico.

He came alone and penniless, but he did not come as one seeking favors. He did not come hunting a job. He came as a conqueror.

For Ross Haney had made his decision. At twenty-seven he was broke. He sat in the middle of all he owned, a splendid appaloosa gelding, a fine California saddle, a .44 Winchester rifle, and two walnut stocked Colt .44 pistols. These were his all. Behind him was a life that had taken him from a cradle in a covered wagon to the hurricane deck of many a hard headed bronc.

It was a life that had left him rich in experience, but poor in goods of the world. The experience was the hard fisted experience of hard winters, dry ranges, and the dusty bitterness of cattle drives. He had fought Comanches and rustlers, hunted buffalo and horse thieves. Now he had decided that it all brought him nothing but grief and more riding. Now he was going to ride for himself, to fight for himself.

His keen dark eyes from under the flat black brim of his hat studied the country below with speculative glint. His judgment of terrain would have done credit to a general, and in his own way, Ross Haney was a general. His arrival in the Ruby Valley country was in its way, an invasion.

HE was a young man with a purpose. He did not want wealth but a ranch, a well watered ranch in a good stock country. That his pockets were empty did not worry him, for he had made up his mind, and as men had discovered before this, Ross Haney with his mind made up was a force to be reckoned with.

Nor was he riding blind into a strange land. Like a good tactician he had gathered his information carefully, judged the situation, the terrain and the enemy before he began his move.

This was new country to him, but he knew the landmarks and the personalities. He knew the strength and the weakness of its rulers, knew the economic factors of their existence, knew the stresses and the strains within it. He knew that he rode into a valley at war —that blood had been shed, and that armed men rode its trails day and night. Into this land he rode a man alone, determined to have his own from the country, come what may, letting the chips fall where they might.

With a movement of his body he turned the gelding left down the trail into the pines, a trail where at this late hour it would soon be dark, a trail somber, majestic in its stillness under the columned trees.

As he moved under the trees, he removed his hat and rode slowly. It was a good country, a country where a man could live and grow, and where if he was lucky, he might have sons to grow tall and straight beside him. This he wanted. He wanted no longer the far horizons. He wanted his own hearth fire, the creak of his own pump, the heads of his own horses looking over the gate bars for his hand to feed them. He wanted peace, and for it he came to a land at war.

A flicker of light caught his eye, and the faint smell of wood smoke. He turned the gelding toward the fire, and when he was near, he swung down. The sun's last rays lay bright through the pines upon this spot. The earth was trampled by hoofs, and in the fire itself the ashes were gray but for one tiny flame that thrust a bright spear upward from the end of a stick.

Studying the scene, his eyes held for an instant on one place where the parched grass had been blackened in a perfect ring.

His eyes glinted with hard humor. "A cinch ring artist. Dropped her there to

cool and she singed the grass. A pretty smooth gent, I'd say."

Not slick enough, of course. A smarter man, or a less confident one would have pulled up that handful of blackened grass and tossed it into the flames.

There had been two men here, his eyes told him. Two men and two horses. One of the men had been a big man with small feet. The impressions of his feet were deeper and he had mounted the largest horse.

ROSS HANEY

Curiously, he studied the scene. This was a new country for him and it behooved a man to know the local customs. He grinned at the thought. If cinch ring branding was one of the local customs, it was a strange one. In most sections of the country the activity was frowned upon, to say the least. If an artist was caught pursuing his calling, he was likely to find himself at the wrong end of a hair rope with nothing under his feet.

The procedure was simple enough. One took a cinch ring from his own saddle gear and holding it between a couple of sticks, used it when red hot like any other branding iron. A good hand with a cinch ring could easily duplicate any known brand, depending only upon his degree of skill.

Ross rolled and lighted a smoke. If he were found on the spot it would require explaining, and at the moment he had no intention of explaining anything. He swung his leg over the saddle and turned the gelding down trail once more.

Not three miles away lay the cowtown known as Soledad. To his right, and about six miles away was an imposing cluster of buildings shaded beneath a splendid grove of old cottonwoods. Somewhat nearer, and also well shaded, was a smaller ranch.

Beyond the rocky ridge that stretched an anxious finger into the lush valley was Walt Pogue's Box N spread.

THE farther ranch belonged to Chalk Reynolds, his RR outfit being easily the biggest in the Ruby Hills country. The nearer ranch belonged to Bob and Sherry Vernon.

"When thieves fall out," Ross muttered aloud, "honest men get their dues. Or that's what they say. Now I'm not laying any claim to being so completely honest, but there's trouble brewing in this valley. When the battle smoke blows away, Ross Haney is going to be top dog on one of these ranches.

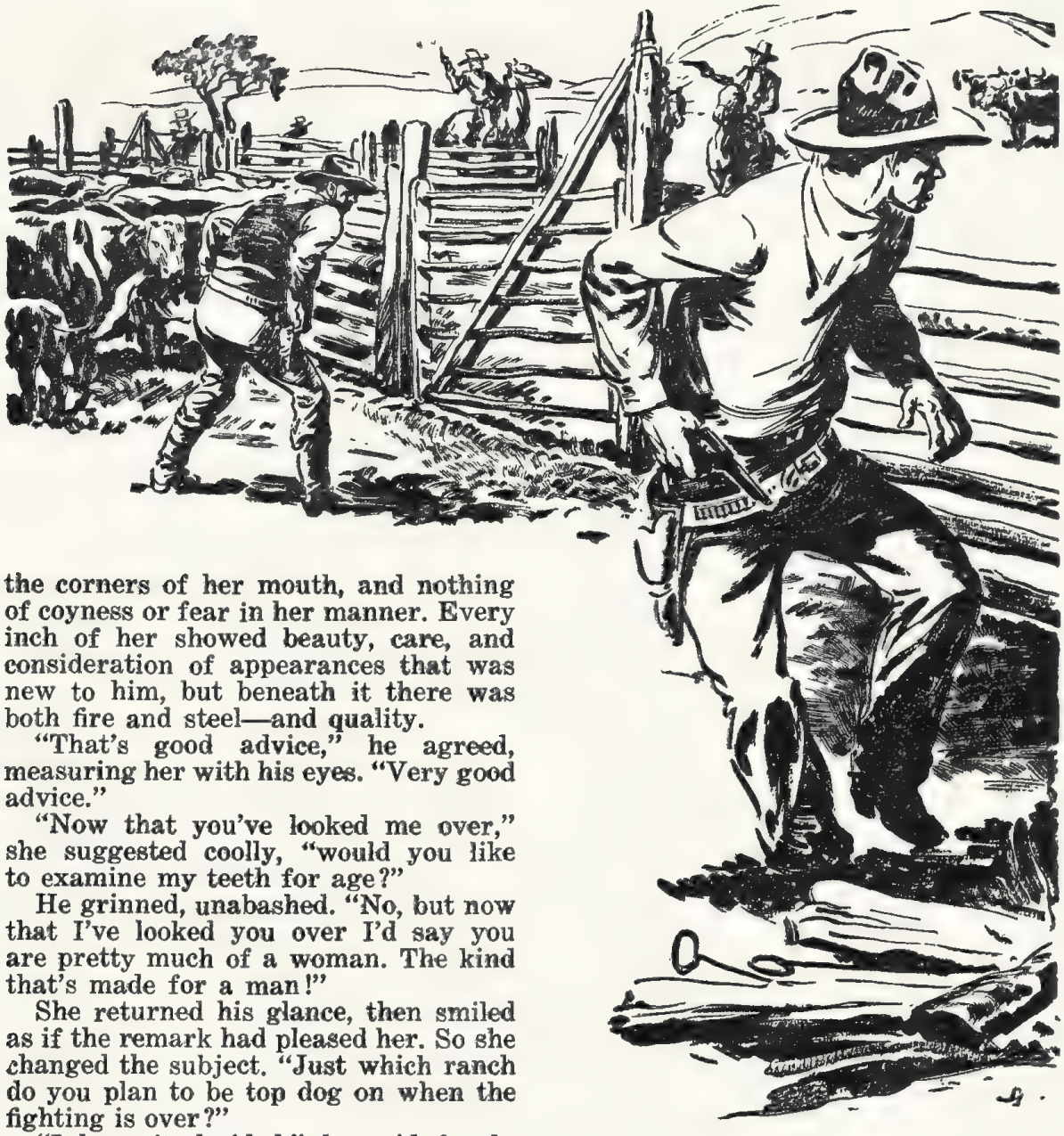
"They've got it all down there. They have range, money, power. They have gunhands riding for them, but you and me, Rio, we've only got each other."

He was a lone wolf on the prowl. Down there they ran in packs, and he would circle the packs, alone. When the moment came, he would close in.

"There's an old law, Rio, that only the strong survive," he said. "Those ranches belong to men who were strong, and some of them still are. They were strong enough to take them from other men, from smaller men, weaker men. That's the story of Reynolds and Pogue. They rustled cows until they grew big and now they sit on the house tops and crow. Or they did until they began fightin' one another."

"Your reasoning," the cool, quiet voice was feminine, "is logical, but dangerous. I might suggest that when you talk to your horse, you should be sure his are the only ears!"

She sat well in the saddle, poised and alert. There was a quirk of humor at



the corners of her mouth, and nothing of coyness or fear in her manner. Every inch of her showed beauty, care, and consideration of appearances that was new to him, but beneath it there was both fire and steel—and quality.

"That's good advice," he agreed, measuring her with his eyes. "Very good advice."

"Now that you've looked me over," she suggested coolly, "would you like to examine my teeth for age?"

He grinned, unabashed. "No, but now that I've looked you over I'd say you are pretty much of a woman. The kind that's made for a man!"

She returned his glance, then smiled as if the remark had pleased her. So she changed the subject. "Just which ranch do you plan to be top dog on when the fighting is over?"

"I haven't decided," he said frankly. "I'm a right choosy sort of man when it comes to horses, ranches, and women!"

"Yes?" She glanced at the gelding. "I'd say your judgment of horses isn't obvious by that one. Not that he isn't well shaped, and I imagine he could run, but you could do better."

"I doubt it." He glanced at her fine, clean limbed thoroughbred. "I'd bet a little money he can outrun that beauty of yours, here to Soledad."

Her eyes flashed. "Why, you idiot! Flame is the fastest horse in this country. He comes of racing stock!"

"I don't doubt it," Haney agreed. "He's a fine horse. But I'll bet my saddle against a hundred dollars that this appaloosa will kick dust in his face before we get to Soledad!"

She laughed scornfully, and her head came up. "You're on!" she cried, and her red horse gave a great bound and hit the trail running. That jump gave the bay the start, but Ross knew his gelding.

Leaning over he yelled into the horse's ear as they charged after the bay. "Come on, boy! We've got to beat that bay! We need the money!" And Rio, seeming to understand, stretched his legs and ran like a scared rabbit.

As they swept into the main road and in full sight of Soledad, the bay was

As gunfire thundered in the branding pens, Haney and Mabry urged their horses into a run (Chap. XII)

leading by three lengths, but despite the miles behind it, the appaloosa loved to run, and he was running now.

The gelding had blood of Arabians in his veins, and he was used to offhand, cow camp style racing. The road took a small jog, but Ross did not swing the gelding around it, but took the desert and mountain bred horse across the stones and through the mesquite hitting the road scarcely a length behind the big red horse.

Men were gathering in the street and on the edge of town now and shouting about the racing horses. With a half mile to go the big red horse was slowing. He was a sprinter, but he had been living too well with too little running. The gelding was just beginning to run. Neck stretched, Ross leaning far forward to cut the wind resistance and lend impetus with his weight, the mustang thundered alongside the bay horse, and neck and neck they raced up to the town. Then, with the nearest building only a short jump ahead, Ross Haney spoke to the appaloosa:

"*Now*, Rio! *Now!*"

With a lunge, the spotted horse was past and went racing into the street leading by a length.

Ross eased back on the reins and let the horse run on down the street abreast of the big red horse. They slowed to a canter, then a walk. The girl's eyes were wide and angry.

"You cheated! You cut across that bend!"

Ross chuckled. "You could have, ma'am! And you got off to a running start. Left me standing still!"

"I thought you wanted a race!" she protested scornfully. "You cheated me!"

Ross Haney drew up sharply, and his eyes went hard. "I reckon ma'am," he said, "you come from a long line of sportsmen! You can forget the bet!"

The sarcasm in his voice cut like a whip. She opened her mouth to speak, but he had turned the appaloosa away and was walking it back toward the center of town.

For an instant, she started to follow, and then with a toss of her head, she let him go.

CHAPTER II

Hunting Trouble

SEVERAL men were standing in front of the livery stable when he rode up. They looked at his horse, then at him. "That's a runner you got there, stranger! I reckon Sherry Vernon didn't relish getting beat! She sets great store by the Flame horse!"

Haney swung down and led the horse into the stable where he rubbed him down and fed him. As he worked, he thought over what he had just learned. The girl was Sherry Vernon, one of the owners of the Twin V spread, and she had overheard his meditations on his plans. How seriously she would take them would be something else again. Well, it did not matter. He was planning no subterfuge. He had come to Ruby Valley on the prod, and they could find it out now as well as later.

The girl had been beautiful. That stuck in his mind after he thought of all the rest. It was the feeling that hung over his thinking with a certain aura that disturbed him. He had known few women who affected him, and those few had been in New Orleans or Kansas City on his rare trips there. Yet, this one touched a chord that had answered to none of the others.

Suddenly he was conscious of a looming figure beside him. For a moment he continued to work. Then he looked around into a broad, handsome face. The man was smiling.

"My name's Pogue," he said, thrusting out a hand. "Walt Pogue. I own the Box N. Is that horse for sale?"

"No, he's not."

"I'd not figured you'd be willing to sell. If you get that idea, come look me up. I'll give you five hundred for him."

Five hundred? That was a lot of money in a country full of ten-dollar mustangs or where a horse was often traded for a quart of whisky.

"No," Haney repeated, "he's not for sale."

"Lookin' for a job? I could use a hand."

Ross Haney drew erect and looked over the horse's back. He noticed, and the thought somehow irritated him, that Pogue was even bigger than himself. The rancher was all of three inches taller and forty pound heavier. And he did not look fat.

"Gun hand? Or cowhand?"

Walt Pogue's eyes hardened a shade, and then he smiled, a grim knowing smile. "Why, man," he said softly, "that would depend on you. But if you hire on as a warrior, you've got to be good!"

"I'm good. As good as any you've got."

"As good as Bob Streeter or Repp Hanson?"

Ross Haney's expression made no change, but within him he felt something tighten up and turn hard and wary. If Pogue had hired Streeter and Hanson, this was going to be ugly. Both men were killers, and not particular how they worked or how they killed.

"As good as Streeter or Hanson?" Haney shrugged. "A couple of cheap killers. Blood hunters. They aren't fighting men."

His dark eyes met that searching stare of Walt Pogue again. "Who does Reynolds have?"

Pogue's face seemed to lower and he stared back at Haney. "He's got Emmett Chubb."

Emmett Chubb!

So? And after all these years? "He won't have him long," Haney said, "because I'm going to kill him!"

Triumph leaped in Pogue's eyes. Swiftly, he moved around the horse. "Haney," he said, "that job could get you an even thousand dollars!"

"I don't take money for killing snakes."

"You do that job within three days and you'll get a thousand dollars!" Pogue said flatly.

Ross Haney pushed by the big man without replying and walked into the street. Three men sat on the rail by the stable door. Had they heard what was said inside? He doubted it, and yet?

Across the street and three doors down was the Trail Emporium. For a long moment his eyes held their look at the one light gleaming in the back of the store. It was after hours and the place was closed, but at the back

door there might be a chance. Deliberately, he stepped into the street and crossed toward the light.

BEHIND him Walt Pogue moved into the doorway and stared after him, his brow furrowed with thought. His eyes went down the lean, powerful figure of the strange rider with a puzzled expression. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he here?

He wore two well worn, tied down guns. He had the still, remote face and the careful eyes typical of a man who had lived much with danger, and typical of so many of the gunfighters of the West. He had refused, or avoided the offer of a job, yet he had seemed well aware of conditions in the Valley.

Had Reynolds sent for him? Or Bob Vernon? He had ridden into town racing with Sherry? Had they met on the trail, or come from the VV? That Pogue must know and at once. If Bob Vernon was hiring gunhands it would mean trouble, and that he did not want. One thing at a time.

Where was he going now? Resisting an instinct to follow Haney, Pogue turned and walked up the street toward the Bit and Bridle Saloon.

Haney walked up to the back door of the store building, hesitated an instant, then tapped lightly.

Footsteps sounded within, and he heard the sound of a gun being drawn from a scabbard. "Who's there?"

Haney spoke softly. "A rider from the Pecos."

The door opened at once, and Ross slid through the opening. The man who faced him was round and white haired. Yet the eyes that took Haney in from head to heel were not old eyes. They were shrewd, hard, and knowing.

"Coffee?"

"Sure. Food, if you got some ready."

"About to eat myself." The man placed the gun on a sideboard and lifted the coffee pot from the stove. He filled the cup as Ross dropped into a chair. "Who sent you here?"

Haney glanced up, then tipped back in his chair. "Don't get on the prod, oldtimer. I'm friendly. When an old friend of yours heard I was headed this way, and might need a smart man to give me a word of advice, he told me to look you up. And he told me what to say."

"My days on that trail are over."

"Mine never started. This is a business trip. I'm planning to locate in the valley."

"Locate? *Here?*" The older man stared at him. He filled his own cup and dishing up a platter of food and slapping bread on a plate, he sat down. "You came to me for advice. All right, you'll get it. Get on your horse and ride out of here as fast as you can. This is no country for strangers, and there have been too many of them around. Things are due to bust wide open and there will be a sight of killin' before it's over."

"You're right, of course."

"Sure. An' after it's over, what's left for a gunhand? You can go on the owlhoot, that's all. The very man who hired you and paid you warrior's wages won't want you when the fighting is over. There's revolution coming in this country. If you know the history of revolutions you'll know that as soon as one is over the first thing they do is liquidate the revolutionists. You ride out of here."

Ross Haney ate in silence. The older man was right, of course. To ride out would be the intelligent, sensible and safe course, and he had absolutely no intention of doing it.

"Scott, I didn't come here to hire on as a gunhand. In fact, I have already had an offer. I came into this country because I've sized it up and I know what it's like. This country can use a good man, a strong man. There's a place for me here, and I mean to take it. Also, I want a good ranch. I aim to settle down, and I plan to get my ranch the same way Pogue, Reynolds and the rest of them got theirs."

"Force? You mean with a gun?" Scott was incredulous. "Listen, young fellow, Pogue has fifty riders on his range, and most of them are ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Reynolds has just as many, and maybe more. And you come in here alone—or are you alone?"

THE storekeeper bent a piercing gaze upon the young man, who smiled.

"I'm alone." Haney shrugged. "Scotty, I've been fighting for existence ever since I was big enough to walk. I've fought to hold other people's cattle, fought for other men's homes, fought for the lives of other men. I've worked and bled and sweated my heart out in rain, dust and storm. Now I want something for myself.

"Maybe I came too late. Maybe I'm way off the trail. But it seems to me that when trouble starts a man might stand on the side lines and when the time comes, he might move in. You see, I know how Walt Pogue got his ranch. Vin Carter was a friend of mine until Emmett Chubb killed him. He told me how Pogue forced his old man off his range and took over. Well, I happen to know that none of this range is legally held. It's been pre-empted, which gives them a claim, of course. Well, I've got a few ideas myself. And I'm moving in."

"Son," Scott leaned across the table, "listen to me. Pogue's the sort of man who would hire killers by the hundreds if he had to. He did force Carter off his range. He did take it by force, and he has held it by force. Now he and Chalk are in a battle over who is to keep it, and which one is to come out on top. The Vernons are the joker in the deck, of course. What both Reynolds and Pogue want is the Vernon place because whoever holds it has a grip on this country. But both of them are taking the Vernons too lightly. They have something up their sleeve, or somebody has.

"What do you mean?"

"There's this Star Levitt, for one. He's no soft touch, that one! And then he's got some riders around there, and I'd say they do more work for him than for the Vernon spread—and not all honest work, by any means!"

"Levitt a Western man?"

"He could be. Probably is. But whoever he is, he knows his way around an' he's one sharp hombre. Holds his cards close to his chest, an' plays 'em that way. He's the one you've got to watch in this deal, not Reynolds an' Pogue!"

Ross Haney leaned back in his chair and smiled at Scott. "That meal sure tasted good!" he acknowledged. "Now comes the rough point. I want to borrow some money—military funds," he added, grinning.

Scotty shook his white head. "You sure beat all! You come into this country huntin' trouble, all alone an' without money! You've got nerve! I only hope you've got the gun savvy and the brains to back it up."

The blue eyes squinted from his leather brown face and he smiled. He was beginning to like Haney. The tall young man had humor and the nerve of the project excited and amused the old outlaw.

"How much do you want?"

"A hundred dollars."

"That all? You won't get far in this country on that."

"No, along with it I want some advice." Haney hitched himself forward and took a bit of paper from his pocket, then a stub of pencil. Then from a leather folder he took a larger sheet which he unfolded carefully. It was a beautifully tanned piece of calfskin, and on it was drawn a map. Carefully, he moved the dishes aside and placed it on the table facing the older man.

"Look that over, and if you see any mistakes, correct me."

Scott stared at the map, then he leaned forward, his eyes indicating his amazed interest. It was a map, drawn to scale and in amazing detail, of the Ruby Hills country. Every line camp, every waterhole, every ranch and every stand of trees was indicated plainly. Distances were marked on straight lines between the various places, and heights of land. Lookout points were noted, canyons indicated. Studying the map, Scott could find nothing it had missed.

Slowly, he leaned back in his chair. When he looked up his expression was half way between respect and worry. "Son, where did you get that map?"

"Get it? I made it. I drew it myself, Scotty. For three years I've talked to every puncher or other man I've met from this country. As they told me stuff, I checked with others and built this map. You know how Western men are. Most of them are pretty good at description. A man down in the Live Oak country who never left it knows how the sheriff looks in Julesberg, and exactly where the corrals are in Dodge."

HANEY took a deep breath, then continued his story.

"Well, I've been studying this situation quite a spell," he said. "An old buffalo hunter and occasional trapper was in this country once, and he told me about it when I was a kid. It struck me as a place I'd like to live, so I planned accordingly. I learned all I could about it, rode for outfits oftentimes just because some puncher on

the spread had worked over here. Then I ran into Vin Carter. He was born here. He told me all about it, and I got more from him than any of them. While I was riding north with a herd of cattle, Emmett Chubb moved in, picked a fight with the kid, and killed him. And I think Walt Pogue paid him to do it!

"So it goes further than the fact that I'm range hungry, and I'll admit I am. I want my own spread. But Vin rode with me and we fought sandstorms and blizzards together from Texas to Montana and back. So I'm a man on the prod. Before I get through I'll own me a ranch in this country, a nice ranch with nice buildings and then I'll get a wife and settle down."

Scott's eyes glinted. "It's a big order, son! Gosh, if I was twenty years younger, I'd throw in with you! I sure would!"

"There's no man I'd want more, Scotty, but this is my fight, and I'll make it alone. You can stake me to eating money, if you want, and I'll need some forty-fours."

The older man nodded assent. "You can have them, an' willin'. Have you got a plan?"

Haney nodded. "It's already started. I've filed on Thousand Springs."

Scott came off his chair, his face a mask of incredulity. "You *what?*"

"I filed a claim, an' I've staked her out and started to prove up." Ross was smiling over his coffee, enjoying Scott's astonishment.

"But, man! That's sheer suicide! That's right in the middle of Chalk's best range! That waterhole is worth a fortune! A dozen fortunes! That's what half the fighting is about!"

"I know it." Haney was calm. "I knew that before I came in here. That palouse of mine never moved a step until I had my plan of action all staked out. And I bought the Bullhorn."

This time astonishment was beyond the storekeeper. "How could you buy it? Gov'ment land, ain't it?"

"No. That's what they all seem to think. Even Vin Carter thought so, but it was part of a Spanish Grant. I found that out by checking through some old records. So I hunted up a Mex down in the Big Bend country who owned it. I bought it from him, bought three hundred acres, taking in the whole Bull-

Ross Haney stood watching, pale and rigid, while Levitt began to collapse slowly to the ground (Chap. XVIII)

horn headquarters spread, the waterhole and the cliffs in back of it. That includes most of that valley where Pogue cuts his meadow hay."

"Well, I'm forever bushed! If that don't beat all!" Scott tapped thoughtfully with his pipe bowl. Then he looked up. "What about Hitson Spring?"

"That's another thing I want to talk to you about. You own it."

"I do, eh? How did you come to think that?"

"Met an old sidewinder down in Laredo named Smite Emmons. He was pretty drunk one night in a greaser's shack, and he told me how foolish you were to file claim on that land. Said you could have bought it from the Indians just as cheap."

Scott chuckled. "I did. I bought it from the Indians, too. Believe me, son, nobody around here knows that. It would be a death sentence!"

"Then sell it to me. I'll give you my note for five thousand right now."

"Your note, eh?" Scott chuckled. "Son, you'd better get killed. It will be cheaper to bury you than pay up." He tapped his pipe bowl again. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll take your note for five hundred and the fun of watching what happens."

Solemnly, Ross Haney wrote out a note and handed it to Scott. The old man chuckled as he read it.

I hereby agree to pay on or before the 15th of March, 1877, to Westbrook Scott, the sum of five hundred dollars and the fun of watching what happens for the 160 acres of land known as Hitson Spring.

"All right, son! Sign her up! I'll get you the deed!"

CHAPTER III

Uneasy Town

WHEN Ross had pocketed the two papers, the deed from the government to Scott and deeded over to him, and the skin deed from the Comanches, the old man sat up and reached for the coffee pot.

"You know what you've done? You've now got a claim on the three best sources of water in Ruby Valley, the only three that are sure-fire all the year around. And what will they do when they find out? They'll kill you!"

"They won't find out for awhile. I'm not talking until the fight's been taken out of them."

"What about your claim stakes at Thousand Springs?"

"Buried. Iron stakes, and driven deep into the ground. There's sod and grass over the top."

"What about proving up?"

"That, too. You know how that spring operates? Actually, it is one great big spring back inside the mountain flowing out through the rocky face of the cliff in hundreds of tiny rivulets. Well, atop the mesa there is a good piece of land that falls into my claim, and back in the woods there is some land I can plow. I've already broken that land, smoothed her out and put in a crop. I've got a trail to the top of that mesa, and a stone house built up there. I'm in business, Scotty!"

Scott looked at him and shook his head. Then he pushed back from the table and getting up, went into the store. When he returned he had several boxes of shells.

"In the mornin' come around and stock up," he suggested. "You better make you a cache or two with an extra gun here and there, and some extra ammunition. Maybe a little grub. Be good insurance, and son, you'll need it."

"That's good advice. I'll do it, an' you keep track of the expense. I'll settle every cent of it when this is over."

With money in his pocket he walked around the store and crossed the street to the Bit and Bridle. The bartender glanced at him, then put a bottle and a glass in front of him. He was a short man, very thick and fat, but after a glance at the corded forearms, Ross was very doubtful about it all being fat.

A couple of lazy talking cowhands held down the opposite end of the bar, and there was a poker game in progress at a table. Several other men sat around on chairs. They were the usual nondescript crowd of the cow trails.

He poured his drink, and had just taken it between his thumb and fingers when the bat wing doors thrust open and he heard the click of heels behind him. He neither turned nor looked around. The amber liquid in the glass

held his attention. He had never been a drinking man, taking only occasional shots, and he was not going to drink much tonight.

The footsteps halted abreast of him, and a quick, clipped voice said in very precise words, "Are you the chap who owns that fast horse, the one with the black forequarters and the white over the loin and hips?"

He glanced around, turning his head without moving his body. There was no need to tell him that this was Bob Vernon. He was a tall, clean limbed young man who was like her in that imperious lift to his chin, unlike her in his quick, decisive manner.

"There's spots, egg shaped black spots over the white," said Haney. "That the one you mean?"

"My sister is outside. She wants to speak to you."

"I don't want to speak to her. You can tell her that." He turned his attention to his drink.

What happened then happened so fast it caught him off balance. A hand grasped him by the shoulder and spun him around in a grip of iron, and he was conscious of being surprised at the strength in that slim hand. Bob Vernon was staring at him, his eyes blazing.

"I said my sister wanted to speak to you!"

"And I said I didn't want to speak to her." Ross Haney's voice was slow paced and even. "Now take your hand off me and don't ever lay a hand on me again!"

Bob Vernon was a man who had never backed down for anyone. From the East he had come into the cow country of Ruby Valley and made a place for himself by energy, decision, and his own youthful strength. Yet he had never met a man such as he faced now. As he looked into the hazel eyes of the stranger he felt something turn over away deep inside him. It was as though he had parted the brush and looked into the face of a lion.

VERNON dropped his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid your manner made me forgetful. My sister can't come into a place like this."

The two men measured each other, and the suddenly alert audience in the Bit and Bridle let their eyes go from Vernon to the stranger. Bob Vernon they knew well enough to know he was afraid of nothing that walked. They also knew his normal manner was polite to a degree rarely encountered in the West where manners were inclined to be brusque, friendly, and lacking in formality. Yet there was something else between these two now. As one man they seemed to sense the same intangible something that had touched Bob Vernon.

The bat wing doors parted suddenly, and Sherry Vernon stepped into the room.

First, Haney was aware of a shock that such a girl could come into such a place, and secondly, of shame that he had been the cause. Then he felt admiration sweep over him at her courage.

Beautiful in a gray tailored riding habit, her head lifted proudly, she walked up to Ross Haney. Her face was set and her eyes were bright.

Ross was suddenly conscious that never in all his life had he looked into eyes so fine, so filled with feeling.

"Sir," and her voice could be heard in every corner of the room, "I do not know what your name may be, but I have come to pay you your money. Your horse beat Flame today, and beat him fairly. I regret the way I acted, but it was such a shock to have Flame beaten that I allowed you to get away without being paid. I am very sorry.

"However," she added quickly, "if you would like to run against Flame again, I'll double the bet!"

"Thank you, Miss Vernon!" He bowed slightly, from the hips. "It was only that remark about my horse that made me run him at all. You see, ma'am, as you no doubt know, horses have feelin's. I couldn't let you run down my horse to his face, that-away!"

Her eyes were on his and suddenly, they crinkled at the corners and her lips rippled with a little smile.

"Now, if you'll allow me—" He took her arm and escorted her from the room. Inside they heard a sudden burst of applause, and he smiled as he offered her his hands for her foot. She stepped into them then swung into her position on the horse.

"I'm sorry you had to come in there, but your brother was kind of abrupt."

"That's quite all right," she replied quickly, almost too quickly. "Now, our business is completed."

He stepped back and watched them ride away into the darkness of early evening. Then he turned back to the saloon. He almost ran into a tall, carefully dressed man who had walked up behind him. A man equally as large as Pogue.

Pale blue eyes looked from a handsome, perfectly cut face of city white. He was trim, neat, and precise. Only the guns at his hips looked deadly with their polished butts and worn holsters.

"That," said the tall man, gesturing after Sherry Vernon, "is a staked claim!"

Ross Haney was getting angry. Men who were bigger than he always irritated him, anyway. "It is?" His voice was cutting. "If you think you can stake a claim on any woman you've got a lot of learn!"

He shoved by toward the door, but behind him the voice said, "But that one's staked. You hear me?"

* * * * *

Soledad by night was a tiny scattering of lights along the dark river of the street. Music from the tinny piano in the Bit and Bridle drifted down the street, and with it the lazy voice of someone singing a cow camp song. Ross Haney turned up the street toward the two-story frame hotel, his mind unable to free itself from the vision that was Sherry Vernon.

For the first time, the wife who was to share that ranch had a face. Until now there had been in his thoughts the vague shadow of a personality and a character, but there had been no definite features, nothing that could be recognized. Now, after seeing Sherry, he knew there could be but one woman in the ranchhouse he planned to build.

HE smiled wryly as he thought of her sharing his life. What would she think of a cowhand? A drifting gunhand? And what would she say when it became known that he was Ross Haney? Not that the name meant very much, for it did not. Only, in certain quarters where fighting men gather, he had acquired something of a reputation. The stories about him had drifted across the country as such stories will, and while he had little notoriety as a gunfighter, he was known as a hard, capable man who would and could fight.

He was keenly aware of his situation in Soledad and the Ruby Hills country. As yet, he was an outsider. They were considering him, and Pogue had already sensed enough of what he was to offer a job, gun or saddle job. When his intentions became known he would be facing trouble and plenty of it. When they discovered that he had actually moved in and taken possession of the best water in the valley, they would have no choice but to buy him out, run him out, or kill him.

Or they could move out themselves, and neither Walt Pogue or Chalk Reynolds was the man for that.

In their fight Ross had no plan to take sides. He was a not too innocent bystander as far as they were concerned. When Bob and Sherry Vernon were considered, he wasn't too sure. He scowled, realizing suddenly that sentiment had no place in such dealings as his. Until he saw Sherry Vernon he had been a free agent, and now, for better or worse, he was no longer quite so free.

He could not now move with such cold indifference to the tides of war in the Ruby Hills. Now he had an interest, and his strength was lowered to just the degree of that interest. He was fully aware of the fact. It nettled him even as it amused him, for he was always conscious of himself, and viewed his motives with a certain wry, ironic humor, seeing himself always with much more clarity than others saw him.

Yet, despite that, something had been accomplished. He had staked his claim at Thousand Springs, and started his cabin. He had talked with Scott, and won an ally there, for he knew the old man was with him, at least to a point. He had met and measured Walt Pogue, and he knew that Emmett Chubb was now with Reynolds. That would take some investigation, for from all he had learned, he had been sure that Pogue had hired Chubb to kill Vin Carter, but now Chubb worked for Reynolds.

Well, the allegiance of such men was tied to a dollar sign, and their loyalty was no longer than their next pay-day. And there might have been trouble between Pogue and Chubb, and that might be the reason Pogue was so eager to have him killed.

He directed his thoughts toward the Vernons. Bob was all man. Whatever

Reynolds and Pogue planned for him he would not take. He would have his own ideas, and he was a fighter.

What of the other hands whom Scott implied were loyal to Levitt rather than Vernon? These men he must consider, too, and must plan carefully for them, for in such an action as he planned, he must be aware of all the conflicting elements in the valley.

The big man in the white hat he had placed at once. Carter had mentioned him with uncertainty, for when Carter left the valley Star Levitt had just arrived and was an unknown quantity.

With that instinctive awareness that the widely experienced man has for such things, Ross Haney knew that he and Star Levitt were slated to be enemies. They were two men who simply could not be friends, for there was a definite clash of personalities and character that made a physical clash inevitable. And Haney was fully aware that Star Levitt was not the soft touch some might believe. He was a dangerous man, a very dangerous man.

CHAPTER IV

Bold Challenge

ROSS HANEY found the hotel was a long building with thirty rooms, a large empty lobby, and off to one side, a restaurant open for business. Feeling suddenly hungry he turned to the desk for a room, his eyes straying toward the restaurant door.

When Haney dropped his warbag a young man standing in the doorway turned and walked to the desk. "Room?" he smiled as he spoke, and his face was pleasant.

"The best you've got." Ross grinned at him.

The clerk grinned back. "Sorry, but they are all equally bad, even if reasonably clean. Take Fifteen at the end of the hall. You'll be closer to the well."

"Pump?"

The clerk chuckled. "What do you think this is? New York? It's a rope and bucket well. It's been almost a year since we hauled a dead man out of it. The water should be good by now."

"Sure." Ross studied him for a moment. "Where you from? New York?"

"Yes, and Philadelphia, Boston, Richmond, London and San Francisco and now—Soledad."

"You've been around." Ross rolled a smoke and dropped the sack on the desk for the clerk. "How's the food?"

"Good. Very good—and the prettiest waitress west of the Mississippi."

Ross smiled. "Well, if she's like the other girls around here, she's probably a staked claim. I had a big hombre with a white hat tell me tonight that one girl was staked out for him."

The clerk looked at him quickly, shrewdly. "Star Levitt?"

"I guess."

"If he meant the lady you had the race with today, I'd say he was doing more hoping than otherwise. Sherry Vernon," the clerk spoke carefully, "is not an easy claim to stake!"

Ross pulled the register around, hesitated an instant, and then wrote his name. *Ross Haney, El Paso.*

The clerk glanced at it, then looked up. "Glad to meet you, Ross. My name

[*Turn page*]

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is Allan Kinney." He looked down at the name again. "Ross Haney. I've heard that name from somewhere.

"It's funny," he added musingly, "about a name and a town. Ross Haney, from El Paso. Now you might not be from El Paso at all. You might be from Del Rio or Sanderson or Uvalde. You might even be from Cheyenne or from Fort Sumner or White Oaks.

"What happened to you in El Paso? Or wherever you came from? And why did you come here? Men drift without reason sometimes, but usually, there is something. Sometimes the law is behind them, or an outlaw ahead of them. Sometimes they just want new horizons or a change of scene, and sometimes they are hunting for something. You, now. I'd say you had come to Soledad for a reason—a reason that could mean trouble."

"Let's drink some coffee," Haney suggested, "and see if that waitress is as pretty as you say."

"You won't think so," Kinney said, shaking his head, "you won't think so at all. You've just seen Sherry Vernon. After her all women looked washed out—until you get over her."

"I don't plan on it."

Kinney dropped into a chair. "That, my friend, is a large order. Miss Vernon usually handles such situations with neatness and despatch. She is always pleasant, never familiar."

"This is different." Ross looked up and suddenly he knew with a queer excitement just what he was going to say. He said it. "I'm going to marry her."

Allan Kinney gulped and put his cup down carefully. "Have you told her? Does she know your intentions are honorable? Does she even know you have intentions?" He grinned. "You know, friend, that is a large order you have laid out for yourself."

The waitress came up. She was a slender, very pretty girl with red hair, a few freckles, and a sort of bubbling good humor that was contagious.

"May," Kinney said, "I want you to meet Ross Haney. He is going to marry Sherry Vernon."

AT THIS Ross felt his ears getting red and cursed himself for a thick-headed fool for ever saying such a thing. It may have been startled from him by the sudden realization that he intended to do just that.

"What?" May said quickly, looking at him, "another one?"

Haney glanced up and suddenly he put his hand over hers and said gently, "No, May. *The* one!"

Her eyes held his for a moment, and the laughter faded from them. "You know," she said seriously, "I think you might!"

She went for their coffee. Kinney looked at Ross with care. "Friend Haney," he said, "you have made an impression. I really think the lady believed you! Now if you can do as well with Miss Vernon, you'll be doing all right."

The door opened suddenly from the street and two men stepped in. Ross glanced up, and his dark eyes held on the two men who stood there.

One of the men was a big man with sloping shoulders, and his eyes caught Haney's and narrowed as if at sudden recognition. The other man was shorter, thicker, but obviously a hardcase. With a queer sort of premonition, Ross guessed that these men were from the Vernon ranch—or they could be. Riders at least who knew about Ross Haney and were more than casually interested.

These could be the men who worked for Star Levitt, and as such they merited study, yet their type was not an unfamiliar one to Ross Haney, nor to any man who rode the borderlands or the wild country. While many a puncher has branded a few mavericks or rustled a few cows when he needed drinking money, or wanted a new saddle, there was a certain intangible yet very real difference that marked those who held to the outlaw trail, and both of these men had it.

They were men with guns for hire, men who rode for trouble, and for the ready cash they could get for crooked work. He knew their type. He had faced such men before, and he knew they recognized him. These men were a type who never fought a battle for anyone but themselves.

Without warning the door pushed open and two men came into the room. Ross glanced around and caught the eye of a short, stocky man who walked with a quick, jerky lift of his knees. He walked now—right over to Haney.

"You're Ross Haney?" he said abruptly. "I've got a job for you! Start

tomorrow morning! A hundred a month an' found. Plenty of horses! I'm Chalk Reynolds an' my place is just out of town in that big clump of cottonwoods. Old place. You won't have any trouble finding it."

Ross smiled. "Sorry, I'm not hunting a job."

Reynolds had been turning away, he whipped back quickly. "What do you mean? Not looking for a job? At a hundred a month? When the range is covered with top hands gettin' forty?"

"I said I didn't want a job."

"Ah?" The genial light left the older man's face, and his blue eyes hardened and narrowed. "So that's it! You've gone to work for Walt Pogue!"

"No, I don't work for Pogue. I don't work for anybody. I'm my own man, Mr. Reynolds!"

Chalk Reynolds stared at him. "Listen, my friend, and listen well. In the Ruby Hills today there are but two factions, those for Reynolds, and those against him. If you don't work for me, I shall regard you as an enemy."

Haney shrugged. "That's your funeral. From all I hear you have enemies enough without choosing any more. Also, from all I hear, you deserve them."

"What?" Reynolds' eyes blazed. "Don't sass me, stranger!"

The lean, whip bodied man beside him touched his arm. "Let me handle this, Uncle Chalk," he said gently. "Let me talk to this man."

Ross shifted his eyes. The younger man had a lantern jaw and unusually long gray eyes. The eyes had a flatness about them that puzzled and warned him. "My name is Sydney Berdue. I am foreman for Mr. Reynolds." He stepped closer to where Haney sat in his chair, one elbow on the table. "Maybe you would like to tell me why he deserves his enemies."

HANEY glanced up at him, his blunt features composed, faintly curious, his eyes steady and aware. "Sure," he said quietly, "I'd be glad to.

"Chalk Reynolds came West from Missouri right after the war with Mexico. For a time he was located in Santa Fe but as the wagon trains started to come west, he went north and began selling guns to the Indians."

Reynolds' face went white and his eyes blazed. "That's not true!"

Haney's glance cut his words short. "Don't make me kill you!" Ross said sharply. "Every word I say is true! You took part in wagon train raids yourself. I expect you collected your portion of white scalps. Then you got out of there with a good deal of loot and met a man in Julesburg who wanted to come out here. He knew nothing of your crooked background, and—"

Berdue's hand was a streak for his gun, but Haney had expected it. When the Reynolds foreman stepped toward him, he had come beyond Haney's outstretched feet, and Ross whipped his toe up behind the foreman's knee and jerked hard just as he shoved with his open hand. Berdue hit the floor with a crash and his gun went off with a roar, the shot plowing into the ceiling. From the room overhead came an angry shout and the sound of bare feet hitting the floor.

Ross moved swiftly. He stepped over and kicked the gun from Berdue's hand, then swept it up.

"Get up! Reynolds, get over there against the wall, *pronto!*"

White-faced, Reynolds backed to the wall, hatred burning deep in his eyes. Slowly, Sydney Berdue got to his feet, his eyes clinging to his gun in Ross Haney's hand."

"Lift your hands, both of you. Now push them higher. Hold it."

He stared at the two men. Behind him, the room was slowly filling with curious onlookers. "Now," Ross Haney said coolly, "I'm going to finish what I started. You asked me why you deserved to have enemies. I started by telling you about the white people you murdered, and by the guns you sold, and now I'll tell you about the man you met in Julesburg."

Reynolds' face was ashen. "Forget that," he said, "you don't need to talk so much. Berdue was huntin' trouble. You forget it. I need a good man."

"To murder, like you did your partner? You made a deal with him, and he came down here and worked hard. He planted those trees. He built that house. Then three of you went out and stumbled into a band of Indians, and somehow, although wounded, you were the only one who got back. And naturally, the ranch was all yours.

"Who were those Indians, Chalk? Or

was there only *one* Indian? Only one, who was the last man of three riding single file?

"You wanted to know why I wouldn't work for you and why you should have enemies. I've told you. And now I'll tell you something more: I've come to the Ruby Hills to stay. I'm not leavin'."

Deliberately, he handed the gun back to Berdue, and as he held it out to him their eyes met and fastened, and it was Sydney Berdue's eyes that shifted first. He took the gun, reversed it, and started it into his holster and then his hand stopped, and his lips drew tight.

Ross Haney was smiling. "Careful, Berdue!" he said softly. "I wouldn't try it, if I were you!"

Berdue stared, and then with an oath he shoved the gun hard into its holster and turning out the door, walked rapidly away. Behind him went Chalk Reynolds, his neck and ears red with the bitterness of the fury that throbbed in his veins.

Slowly, in a babble of talk, the room cleared, and then Ross Haney seated himself again. "May," he said, "you've let my coffee get cold. Fill it up, will you?"

CHAPTER V

A Look at the Country

PERSONS who lived in the town of Soledad were not unaccustomed to sensation, but the calling of Chalk Reynolds and his supposedly gun-slick foreman in the Cattleman's Cafe was a subject that had the old maids of both sexes licking their lips with anticipation and excitement. Little had been known of the background of Chalk Reynolds. He was the oldest settler, the owner of the biggest and oldest ranch, and he was a hard character when pushed. Yet now they saw him in a new light, and the story went from mouth to mouth.

Not the last to hear it was Walt Pogue, who chuckled and slapped his heavy thigh. "Wouldn't you know it? That old four-flusher! Crooked as a dog's hind leg!"

The next thing that occurred to anyone, occurred to him. How did Ross Haney know?

The thought drew Pogue up to a standstill. Haney knew too much. Who was Haney? If he knew that, he might— But no! That didn't necessarily follow. Still, Ross Haney was going to be a good friend to have, and a bad enemy.

Not the least of the talk concerned Haney's confidence, the way he had stood there and dared Berdue to draw. Overnight Haney had become the most talked about man in the Ruby Hills.

When gathering his information about the Ruby Hills country, Ross Haney had gleaned some other information that was of great interest. That information was what occupied his mind on the first morning in Soledad.

So far, in his meandering around the country, and he had done more of it than anyone believed, he had no opportunity to verify this final fragment of information. But now he intended to do it. From what he had overheard, the country north and west of the mountains was a badlands that was avoided by all. It was a lava country, broken and jagged, and there was much evidence of prehistoric volcanic action, so much so that riding there was a danger always, and walking was the surest way to ruin a pair of boots.

Yet at one time there had been a man who knew the lava beds and all of that bad lands country that occupied some three hundred square miles stretching north and west across the state line. That man had been Jim Burge.

It had been Jim Burge who told Charlie Hastings, Reynolds' ill-fated partner, about the Ruby Hills country, and it had been Jim Burge who first drove a herd of Spanish cattle into the Ruby Hills. But Burge tired of ranching and headed north, leaving his ranch and turning his horses loose. His cattle were already gone.

Gone, that is, into the badlands. Burge knew where they were, but cattle were of no use without a market, and there was no market anywhere near. Burge decided he wanted to move, and he wanted quick money, so he left the country, taking only a few of the best horses with him.

He had talked to Charlie Hastings and Hastings talked to Chalk Reynolds,

but Jim Burge was already gone. Gone east into the Texas Panhandle and a lone hand fight with Comanches that ended with four warriors dead and with Jim Burge's scalp hanging from the belt of another. But Jim Burge had talked to other people in Santa Fe, and the others did not forget, either. One of these had talked to Ross Haney, and Ross was a curious man.

When he threw his saddle on the appaloosa, he was planning to satisfy that curiosity. He was going to find out what had become of those cattle.

Nine years had passed since Burge left them to shift for themselves. In nine years several hundred cattle can do pretty well for themselves.

"There's water in those badlands if you know where to look," Burge had told the man in Santa Fe, "an' there's grass, but you've got to find it." Knowing range cattle, Ross was not worried about them finding it, and if he could find it, he would find them—unless someone else had.

So he rode out of Soledad down the main trail, and there were many eyes that followed him out. One pair of these belonged to Sherry Vernon, already out and on her horse, drifting over the range, inspecting her cattle and seeing where they fed. She noted the tall rider on the queerly marked horse, and there was a strange leap in her heart as she watched him heading down the trail.

Was he leaving? For always? The thought gave her a pang, even though remembering the oddly intent look in his eyes and the hard set to his jaw, she knew he would be back.

OF COURSE, she had heard the story of his meeting with Chalk Reynolds and Sydney Berdue. Berdue had always frightened her, for wherever she turned, his eyes were upon her. They gave her a crawling sensation, not at all like the excitement she drew from the quick, amused eyes of Ross Haney.

The palouse was a good mountain horse, and ears pricked forward, he stepped out eagerly. The sights and smells were what he knew best and he quickened his step, sure he was coming home.

Ross Haney knew that with his action of the previous night he was in the center of things whether he liked it or not, and he liked it. From now on he would move fast, and with boldness, not too definitely, for it would pay to keep them puzzled for a few days longer. Things would break shortly between Pogue and Reynolds, especially now that his needling of Reynolds would scare the old man into aggressive action.

Chalk was no fool. He would know how fast talk would spread. It might not be long before embarrassing questions might be asked. The only escape from those questions lay in power. He must put himself beyond questions. Eyes squinted against the glare, Haney thought about that, trying to calculate just what Reynolds would do. It was up to him to strike, and he would strike, or Haney knew nothing of men under pressure.

The trail he sought showed itself suddenly, just a faint track off to the right through the piñons, and he took it, letting Rio set his own gait.

It was midafternoon before Ross reached the edge of the lava beds. The black tumbled masses seemed without trails or any sign of vegetation. He skirted the great black, tumbled masses of lava, searching for some evidence of a trail. It was miserably hot, and the sun threw heat back from the blazing rocks until he felt like he was in an oven. When he was on a direct line between the lava beds and Thousand Springs, he rode back up the mountain, halted, and swung down to give his horse a rest.

From his saddle-bags he took a telescope, a glass he had bought in New Orleans several years before. Sitting down on a boulder while the palouse cropped casually at the dry grass, he began a systematic, inch by inch study of the lava beds.

Only the vaguest sort of plan had formed in his mind for his next step. Everything had been worked out carefully to this point, but from now on his action depended much upon the actions of Pogue and Reynolds. Yet he did have the vestige of a plan. If the cattle he sought were still in the lava beds, he intended to brand them one by one and shove bunches of them out into the valley. He was going to use that method to make his bid for the valley range.

After a half hour of careful study he got up, thrust the glass in his belt,

and rode slowly along the hillside, stopping at intervals to continue his examination of the beds. It was almost dusk when he raised up in the stirrups and pointed the glass toward a tall finger of rock that thrust itself high from the beds. At the base of it was a cow, and it was walking slowly toward the northwest!

Try as he might, Ross could find no trail into the lava beds, so as dusk was near, he turned the palouse and started back toward Thousand Springs. He would try again. At least, he knew he was not shooting in the dark. There was at least one cow in that labyrinth of lava, and if there was one, there would certainly be more.

The trail he had chosen led him up the mesa at Thousand Springs from a little known route. He wound around through the clumps of piñon until the flat top was reached. Then he rode along slowly, drinking in this beauty that he had chosen for the site of his home. The purple haze had thickened over the hills and darkened among the trees, and deep shadows gathered in the forested notches of the hills while the pines yet made a dark fringe against a sky still red with the last rose of the sinking sun.

Below him the mesa broke sharply off and fell for over a hundred feet of sheer rock. Thirty feet from the bottom of the cliff the springs trickled from the fractured rock and covered the rock below with a silver sheen from many small cascades that fell away into the pool below.

BEYOND the far edge of the pool, fringed with aspens, the valley fell away in a long sweep of tall grass range, rolling into a dark distance against the mystery of the hills. Ross Haney sat his horse in a place rarely seen by man, for he was doubtful if anyone in many years had mounted the mesa. That he was not the first man here, he knew, for there were Indian relics and the remains of stone houses, ages old. These seemed to have no connection with any cliff dwellings or pueblos he had seen in the past. The building was more ancient and more massive than on Acoma, the Sky City.

The range below him was the upper end of Ruby Valley and was supposedly under control of Chalk Reynolds. Actually, he rarely visited the place, nor did his men. It was far and away at the end of the range he claimed, and the water was available for the cattle when they wished to come to it. Yet here on the rim of the mesa, or slightly back from the rim Haney had begun to build a ranch house, using the old foundations of the prehistoric builders, and many of their stones.

The floor itself was intact, and he availed himself of it, sweeping it clean over a wide expanse. He had paced it off, and planned his house accordingly, and he had large ideas. Yet for the moment he was intent only on repairing a part of the house to use as his claim shanty.

There was water here. Water that bubbled from the same source as that of the Thousand Springs. He knew that his water was the same water. Several times he had tried dropping sticks or leaves into the water outside his door, only to find them later in the pool below.

From where he sat he could with his glass see several miles of trail, and watch all who approached him. The trail up the back way was unknown so far as he could find out. Certainly it indicated no signs of use but that of wild game, although it had evidently been used in bygone years.

To the east and south his view was unobstructed. Below him lay all the dark distance of the valley and the range for which he was fighting. To the north, the mesa broke sharply off and fell away into a deep canyon with a dry wash at its bottom. The side of the canyon across from him was almost as sheer as this and at least a quarter of a mile away.

The trail led up from the west and through a broken country of tumbled rock, long fingers of lava, and clumps of piñon giving way to aspen and pine. The top of the mesa was at least two hundred acres in extent and absolutely impossible to reach by any known route but the approach he used.

Returning through the trees to a secluded hollow, Ross swung down and stripped the saddle and bridle from the palouse, then turning it loose. He rarely hobbled or tied the horse, for Rio would come at a call or whistle, and never failed to respond at once. But a horse in most cases will not wander far from

a camp fire, feeding away from it, and then slowly feeding back toward it, seeming to like the feeling of comfort as well as a man.

He built his fire of dry wood and built it with plenty of cover, keeping it small. Even at this height there was no danger of it being seen and causing wonder. The last thing he wanted for now was any of the people from the valley to find him out.

After he had eaten he strolled back to the open ground where the house was taking shape. Part of the ancient rock floor he was keeping for a terrace from which the whole valley could be seen.

For a long time he stood there, looking off into the darkness and enjoying the cool night air. Then he turned and walked back into the deep shadows of the house. He was standing there, trying to see it as it would appear when complete when he heard a low, distant rumble.

Suddenly anxious, he listened intently. It seemed to come from within the very rock on which he stood. He waited, listening for the sound to grow. But after a moment it died away to a vague rumble, and then disappeared altogether. Puzzled, he walked around for several minutes, waiting and listening, but there was no further sound.

It was a strange thing, and it disturbed him and left him uneasy as he walked back to his camp. Long after he rolled in his blankets he lay there puzzling over it. He noted with an odd sense of disquiet that Rio stayed close to him, closer than usual. Of course, there could be another reason for that. There were cougars on the mesa and in the breaks behind it. He had seen their tracks. There were also elk and deer, and twice he had seen bear.

The country he had chosen was wildly beautiful, a strange, lost corner of the land, somehow cut off from the valley by the rampart of Thousand Springs Mesa.

He awakened suddenly as the sky was growing gray, and found himself sitting bolt upright. And then he heard it again, that low, mounting rumble, far down in the rock beneath him, as though the very spirit of the mountain were rolling over in him in his sleep. Only here the sound was not so plain, it was fainter, farther away.

CHAPTER VI

Hidden Range

AT daybreak Ross rolled out of his blankets, built a fire and made coffee. While eating, he puzzled over the strange sound he had heard the night before. The only solution that seemed logical was that it came somehow from the springs. It was obvious that forces of some sort were at work deep in the rock of the mesa.

Obviously, these forces had made no recent change in the contour of the rock itself, and so must be insufficient for the purpose. Haney continued with his building, working the morning through.

Unlike many cowhands, he had always enjoyed working with his hands. Now he had the pleasure of doing something for himself, with the feeling that he was building to last. By noon he had another wall of heavy stone constructed and the house was beginning to take shape.

He stopped briefly to eat, and slipped on his shirt before sitting down. As he buttoned it up, he saw a faint movement far down the Soledad trail. Going to his saddle-bags he dug out his glass and took his position in a lookout post among the rocks on the rim. First making sure the sunlight would not reflect from the glass and give him away, he dropped flat among the rocks and pointed the glass down trail.

The rider's face was still indistinct, but there was something vaguely familiar about him. And then as he drew nearer, Ross saw it Sydney Berdue.

What was the Reynolds foreman doing here? Of course, as this was considered RR range, he might be checking the grass or the stock. He rode swiftly, however, and paid no attention to anything around him. When he reached the pool below, he swung down, seated himself on a rock, and lighted a cigarette.

Waiting for someone.

The sun felt warm and comfortable on his back after the hard work of the morning and Ross settled himself com-

fortably into the warm sand behind the rocks. Thoughtfully, he turned his glass down the trail, but saw no one else. Then he began scanning the country, and after a few minutes, picked up another rider. The man rode a sorrel horse with three white stockings and must have approached through the timber as he was not in sight until the last minute. He rode swiftly up to the pool and swung down. The two men shook hands, and puzzled, Ross shifted his glass to the brand.

The sorrel carried a VV on his shoulder! A Vernon rider at what was apparently a secret meeting with the foreman of the RR! The two seated themselves, and Haney waited, studying them and then the trail. And now he saw two more horsemen, and these were riding up the trail together. One was a big, slope shouldered man whom he had seen in Soledad, and he rode a Box N horse. The last man rode a gray mustang with the Three Diamonds of Star Levitt on his hip.

Here was something of real interest. The four brands, two of them outwardly at war, the others on the verge of it, meeting in secret. Haney cursed his luck that he could not hear what was said, but so far as he could see, Berdue seemed to be laying down the law.

Then he saw something else.

At first it was a vague suggestion of disturbance in the grass and brush near the foot of the cliff, and then he saw a slight figure, creeping nearer. His heart leaped as he saw Sherry Vernon crawling nearer!

Sherry Vernon!

Whatever the meeting of the four men meant, it was at least plain that they intended no one to see or overhear what they had to say. If the girl was seen or heard, she would be in great danger. Sliding back from his lookout point, he ran in a crouching run toward the house and got his Winchester.

By the time he was back, the brief meeting was breaking up. The girl lay still below him, and the men mounted, one by one, and rode away. The last to go was Sydney Berdue.

After several minutes had passed, Sherry got to her feet and walked out in the open. She went to the spring and drank, then stood looking around, obviously in profound thought.

ROSS debated the possibility of getting his horse, but dismissed it as impossible. It would require a couple of hours at least to ride from here to the spring, although he was within a few hundred feet of it.

The girl walked away toward the woods, finally, evidently for her horse. After some minutes she rode out of the trees on Flame and started down the trail toward the VV Ranch, distant against the far hills.

There had been a meeting of the four-brands, but not of the leaders. Sherry Vernon had probably overheard what was said. He scowled thoughtfully. The girl had moved with care and skill, and her actions showed she was no mean woodsman when it came to playing the Indian. None of the four below had been a tenderfoot, yet she had approached them and listened without giving herself away. Sherry Vernon, he decided, would bear some watching herself.

Saddling Rio, Ross rode back through the aspens and down the lonely and dangerous trail to the rim of the badlands. He still had found no way to enter the lava beds, and if he was to take the next step in his program of conquest, he must find the cattle that he was sure still roamed among those remote and lost waterholes in the lava.

The afternoon was well along before he found himself skirting the rim of the canyon that opened near the lava beds, and when he reached them it was already late. There would be little time for a search, but despite that, he turned north, planning to cut back around the mesa and return to Soledad by way of the Springs.

A slight movement among the trees ahead caused him to halt, and then he saw several elk drifting slowly down a narrow glade toward the lava. His eyes narrowed suddenly. There was no water of which he knew closer than the Thousand Springs pool, and these elk were drifting away from it rather than toward it. As they usually watered at sundown or before daybreak, they must be headed for water elsewhere, and that could be in the lava.

Dismounting, he ground-hitched his horse and watched the elk as they drifted along until they had almost vanished in the trees, then he mounted and followed them down. When the trail he was following turned down and

joined theirs, he continued along it. In a few minutes he grunted with satisfaction, for the hoof marks led him right up to the lava and into a narrow cleft between two great folds of the black rocks.

Riding carefully, for the trail was very narrow and the lava on both sides black and rough, he kept on, following the elk. It was easy to see how such a trail might exist for years and never be found, for at times he was forced to draw one leg up and lift the stirrup out of the way, as it was too narrow, otherwise.

The trail wound around and around, covering much distance without penetrating very far, and then it dipped down suddenly through a jagged and dangerous looking cleft. Ross hesitated, studying the loose hanging crags above with misgiving. They looked too shaky and insecure for comfort. He well knew that if a man was ever trapped or hurt in this lava bed, he might as well give up. There would be no help for him.

Yet, with many an upward glance at the great, poorly balanced chunks of rock, many of them weighing many tons, he rode down into the cleft on the trail of the elk.

For over a half mile the cleft led him steadily downward, much of the going very steep, and he realized that he was soon going to be well below the level of the surrounding country. He rode on, however, despite the growing darkness, already great in the dark bottom of the cleft. Then the trail opened out, and he stopped with a gasp of amazement.

Before him lay a great circular valley, an enormous valley surrounded by gigantic black cliffs that in many places shelved out over the edge, but the bottom was almost level and was covered with rich green grass. There were a few scattered clumps of trees, and from somewhere he heard the sound of water.

DRIFTING on, he looked up and around him, overcome with astonishment. The depth of the valley, at least a thousand feet lower than the surrounding country, and the unending sameness of the view of the beds from above safely concealed its existence. It was without doubt an ancient volcanic crater, long extinct, and probably the source of the miles of lava beds which had been spewed forth in some bygone age.

The green fields below were dotted with cattle, most of them seemingly in excellent shape. Here and there among them he noticed small groups of horses, without doubt these were the cattle and horses, or their descendants, left by Jim Burge.

Despite the lateness of the hour, he pushed on, marveling at the mighty walls around him, at the green grass and the white trunked aspens. Twice he found springs of water, in both cases they bubbled from the ground. Later, he found one spring that ran from a cleft in the rock and trickled down over the worn face of the cliff for some thirty feet to sink into the ground below.

None of the cattle seemed in the least frightened of him, although they moved back as he approached, and several lifted their noses at him curiously.

When he had ridden for well over two miles he drew up in a small glade near a spring and stripping the saddle from his horse, he made camp. This would end his rations, and tomorrow he must start back. Obviously, this would be a good place to start such a cache of supplies as Scott had advised.

Night brought a strange coolness to the valley. He built a fire and fixed his coffee, talking to Rio meanwhile. After a moment he became conscious of movement. He looked up and saw that a dozen or more cows and a bull had moved up. They were staring at the fire and at him with their amazed bovine eyes. Apparently they had never seen a man before.

From all appearances, the crater was a large one, being several miles across and carpeted with this rich grass. The cattle were all in good shape. Twice during the night he heard the cry of a cougar and once the howl of a wolf.

With daylight he was in saddle once more, but by day the crater proved to be smaller than he had at first believed, and there was probably some two thousand acres in the bottom. But it was all the same level ground with rich grass and a good bit of timber, all things considered.

Twice, when skirting the edges of the crater he found ice caves. These he knew were caused by the mass cooling so unevenly that when the surface

had become cold and hard the material below was still molten. As the fluid drained away, caves were formed under the solid crust. Because lava is a poor heat conductor, the cold air of the caves was protected. Ice formed there, and no matter how warm it might be on the surface, there was always snow in the caves. At places pools of clear, cold water had formed. He could see that some of these had been used as watering places by the deer, elk and wild horses.

When at last he started back toward the cleft through which he had gained entrance to the crater, he was sure there was several hundred, perhaps as many as six hundred head of wild cattle in the bottom of the crater.

He rode out, but not with any feeling of comfort. Some day he would scale those cliffs and have a look at the craggy boulders on the rim. If they ever fell into the cleft, whoever or whatever was in the bottom would never come out.

It was dusk of another evening before the palouse cantered down the one street of Soledad and drew up at the livery stable. A Mexican came to the door, glanced at him, and then accepted his horse. He looked doubtfully at the strange brand.

"You ride for Señor Pogue or Señor Reynolds?" he asked hesitantly.

"For myself," Ross said. "What's the matter? The town seems quiet."

"*Si, señor.* There has been a keeling. Rolly Burt of the RR was in a shooting with two hands from the Box N. One of them was killed, the other wounded, and Señor Burt has disappeared."

"Left the country?"

"Who knows? He was wounded, they say, and I am sorry for that. He was a good man, Señor Burt." The Mexican lighted a smoke, glancing at Haney. "Perhaps he was no longer wanted on the RR, either."

"Why do you say that?" Ross asked quickly. "Have you any reason for it?"

"*Si.* He has told me himself that he has trouble weeth Señor Berdue."

Berdue had trouble with Burt, yet Burt was attacked by two Box N hands? That didn't seem to tie in, or did it? Could there be any connection between this shooting and the meeting at the Springs? In any event, this would probably serve to start hostilities again.

CHAPTER VII

Man-Hunt

LEAVING his horse to be cared for, Ross returned to his room in the Cattlemen's Hotel. Kinney was not in the lobby when he crossed it, and he found no one on the stairs. He knew how precarious was his own position, for while the house he was building was reasonably safe from discovery, there was no reason to believe that someone would not soon discover the ground had been plowed back under the trees. It wasn't much, but enough to indicate he was working on the place.

Uneasily, he surveyed the situation. So far everything was proceeding according to plan, and almost too well. He had his water rights under control. He had found the cattle. He had in the crater and on the mesa two bases of action that were reasonably safe from attack, yet the situation was due to blow up at almost any moment.

Berdue seemed to be playing a deep game. It might be with the connivance of his uncle, but he might be on his own. Perhaps someone else had the same idea he had, that from the fighting of Pogue and Reynolds would come a new system of things in the Ruby Hills country. Perhaps Berdue, or some other unnamed person or group planned to be top dog.

Berdue's part in it puzzled Haney, but at least he knew by sight the men he had met today, and would be able to keep a closer watch on them. Also, there was still the strange three men, of whom he had seen but two, who lived on the VV. Somehow they did not seem to fit with what he had seen of the Vernons. "The next order of business," he told himself, "is a visit to the VV."

A dozen people were eating in the saloon when he entered. He stopped at one side of the door and surveyed the groups with care. It would not do to walk into Berdue or Reynolds unawares, for Berdue would not, and Reynolds dared not, ignore him. He had stepped on the scene in Soledad in no uncertain terms.

Suddenly, at a small table alone, he saw Sherry Vernon. On an impulse, he walked over to her, his spurs jingling. She glanced up at him, momentarily surprised.

"Oh, it's you again? I thought you had left town."

"You knew better than that." He indicated the chair opposite her. "May I sit down?"

"Surely." She looked at him thoughtfully. "You know, Ross Haney, you're not an entirely unhandsome sort of man, but I've a feeling you're still pretty savage."

"I LIVE in a country that is savage," he said simply. "It is a country that is untamed. The last court of appeal is a six-shooter."

"From all I hear you gave Sydney Berdue some uncomfortable moments without one. You're quite an unusual man. Sometimes your language sounds like any cowboy, and sometimes it doesn't, and sometimes your ideas are different."

"You find men of all kinds in the West. The town drunk in Julesburg when I was there, could quote Shakespeare and had two degrees. I punched cows on the range in Texas with the brother of an English lord."

"Are you suggesting that you are a duke in disguise?"

"Me?" he grinned. "No, I'm pretty much what I seem. I'm a cowhand, a drifter. Only I've a few ideas and I've read a few books. I spent a winter once snowed up in the mountains in Montana with two other cowhands. All we had for entertainment was a couple of decks of cards, some checkers, and a half dozen books. Some Englishman left them there, and I expect before spring we all knew those books by heart, an' we'd argued every point in them."

"What were they?" she asked curiously.

"Plutarch's *Lives*, the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare, some history—oh, a lot of stuff. And good reading. We had a lot of fun with those books. When we'd played cards and checkers until we were black in the face, we'd ask each other questions on the books, for by the time we'd been there half the winter we'd read them several times over."

He ate in silence for a few minutes, and then she asked, "Do you know anything about the shooting?"

"Heard about it. What sort of man is Rolly Burt?"

"One of the best. You'd like him, I think. Hard as nails, and no youngster. He's more than forty, I'd say. But he says what he thinks, and he thinks a good deal."

ROSS hesitated a few minutes, and then said, "By the way, I saw one of your hands in town yesterday. A tall, slope shouldered fellow in a checkered shirt. You know the one I mean?"

She looked up at him, her eyes cool and direct. He had an uncomfortable feeling that she knew more than she was allowing him to think. Of course, this was the man she had watched from hiding as he met Berdue. Probably she had overheard their talk.

"Oh, you mean Kerb Dahl! Yes, he's one of our hands. Why do you ask?"

"Wondering about him. I'm trying to get folks placed around here."

"There are a lot of them trying to get you placed, too."

He laughed. "Sure! I expected that. Are you one of them?"

"Yes, I think I am. You remember I overheard your talk on the trail and I'm still wondering where you plan to be top dog?"

He flushed. "You shouldn't have heard that. However, I back down on none of it. I know how Chalk Reynolds got his ranch. I know how Walt Pogue got his, and neither of them have any moral or other claim to them aside from possession, if that is a right.

"You probably heard what I told Chalk in here the other night. I could tell him more. I haven't started on Pogue yet, and I'd as soon you didn't tell anyone I plan to. However, in good time I shall. You see, he ran old man Carter off his place, and he had Emmett Chubb kill Vin Carter. That's one of the things that drew me here."

"Revenge?"

"Call it that if you like. I have a different name." He leaned toward her, suddenly eager for her to understand, "You see, you can't judge the West by any ordered land you know. It is a wild, hard land, and the men that came west and survived were tough stern men. They fought Indians and white men who were worse than Indians.

They fought winter, flood, storm, drouth and starvation.

"We have a sheriff here in town who was practically appointed by Chalk Reynolds. We have a jail that stands on his land. The nearest court is two hundred miles away, over poor roads and through Indian country. North of us there is one of the wildest and most remote lands in North America where a criminal could escape and hide for years.

"The only law we have here is the law of strength. The only justice we have must live in the hearts and minds of men. The land is hard, and so the men are hard. We make mistakes, of course, but when there is a case of murder, we try to handle the murderer so he will not kill again.

"Some day we will have law, we will have order. Then we can let the courts decide, but now we have none of those things. If we find a mad dog, we kill him, for there is no dog catcher or law to do it. If we find a man who kills unfairly, we punish him. If two men fight and all is equal, regardless of which cause is right, we let the killing stand. But if a man is shot in the back, without a gun or a fair chance, then the people or sometimes one man must act.

"I agree that it is not right. I agree that it should be different, but this is yet a raw, hard land, and we must have our killers, not punished, but prevented from killing again.

"Vin Carter was my friend. Of that I can say nothing, only that because he was my friend, I must act for him. He was not a gun-fighter. He was a brave young man, a fair shot, and on the night he was killed, he was so drunk he could scarcely see. He did not even know what was happening. It was murder.

"So I have come here. It so happens that I am like some of these men. Perhaps I am ruthless. Perhaps in the long run I shall lose, and perhaps I shall gain. No man is perfect. No man is altogether right or altogether wrong. Pogue and Reynolds got their ranches and power through violence. They are now in a dog eat dog feud of their own. When that war is over, I expect to have a good ranch. If it leaves them both alive and in power, I shall have my ranch, anyway."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Where, Ross?"

HIS pulse leaped at the use of his first name, and he smiled suddenly. "Does it matter now? Let's wait, and then I'll tell you."

The smile left his face. "By the way, as you left me the other evening, a man told me you were a staked claim, and to stay away."

"What did you do?" she looked at him gravely, curiously.

"I told him he was a fool to believe any woman was a staked claim unless she wanted it so. And he said nevertheless, you were staked. If it is of interest, you might as well know that I don't believe him. Also, I wouldn't pay any attention if I did."

She smiled. "I would be surprised if you did. Nevertheless," her chin lifted a little, "what he said is true."

Ross Haney's heart seemed to stop. For a full minute he stared at her, amazed and wordless. Then he stared. "You mean—what?"

"I mean that I am engaged to marry Star Levitt. I have been engaged to him for three months."

She arose swiftly. "I must be going now." Her hand dropped suddenly to his with a gentle pressure, and then she was gone.

He stared after her. His thoughts refused to order themselves, for of all the things she might have said, or that he might have expected, this was the last. Sherry Vernon was engaged to Star Levitt.

"Some hot coffee?" It was May, smiling down at him.

"Sure." She cleaned up the table, then left him alone. "Sure," he said again, speaking softly into empty air. "That's the way it would be. I meet a girl worth having and she belongs to somebody else!"

"Mind if I sit down?"

He looked up to see Allan Kinney, the hotel clerk, standing by the table. "Go ahead," he suggested, "and have some coffee."

May delivered the coffee, and for a few minutes there was silence. "Ross you'd do a lot for a friend, wouldn't you?"

Surprised, he glanced up and something in Kinney's eyes told him what was coming. 'Why, sure!" But even as he said it he was thinking it over, thinking over what he knew Kinney had on his mind.

Of course, he should have guessed it right away. There was no other place. This was a Walt Pogue, Chalk Reynolds town.

"Do you regard me as a friend? Of course, I haven't known you long, but you seem like a regular fellow. You haven't any local ties that I can see."

"That's right! I just cut the last one. Or had it cut. What do you want me to do? Get him out of town?"

Kinney jerked sharply. "You mean —you know?"

"I guessed. Where else would he go? Is Burt hurt bad?"

"He can ride. He's a good man, Ross. One of the best. I had no idea what to do about him because I know they will think of the hotel soon."

"You've got him *here?*" Haney was incredulous. "We'd best get him out tonight. That Box N crowd will be in hunting him, and I've a hunch the RR outfit won't back him the least bit."

"He's in the potato cellar. In a box under the potatoes."

"Whatever made you ask me?" Ross demanded.

Kinney shrugged. "Well, like I said, you hadn't any ties here, and seemed on the prod, as they say in Soledad. Then, May suggested it. May did, and Sherry."

"She knows?"

"I thought of her first. The VV is out of this fight so far, and it seemed the only place, but she told me she would like to, but there were reasons why it was the very worst place for him. Then she suggested you."

"*She* did?"

"Uh-huh. She said if you liked Burt, she knew you would do it, and you might do it just as a slap at Reynolds and Pogue. She didn't seem to believe Reynolds would help, either."

Haney digested that thoughtfully. Apparently Sherry had a pretty good idea of just what undercurrents were moving the pawns about in the Soledad chess game. Of course, she would have heard at least part of Bergue's talk with Kerb Dahl and the others.

"We can't wait," Haney said. "It will have to be done now. The Box N hands should be getting to town within the hour. Have you got a spare horse?"

"Not that we can get without everybody knowing, but May has one at her place," Kinney answered. "She lives on the edge of town. The problem is to get him there."

"I'll get him there," Haney promised. "But I'd best get mounted myself. I know where to take him, too. However, you'd best throw us together a sack of grub from the restaurant supplies so there won't be too many questions asked. After I come back again, I can arrange to get some stuff."

Ross Haney got to his feet. "Get him ready to move. I'll get my horse down to May's and come back." He listened while Kinney gave him directions about finding her house, and then hurried to the door.

It was too late.

A dozen hard riding horsemen came charging up the street and they swung down at the hotel. One man stepped up on the boardwalk and strode into the hotel. Haney knew him by his size. It was Walt Pogue himself, and the man at his right was the man who had been with Berdue at the Springs!

"Kinney! I want to search your place! That killer Rolly Burt is somewhere in town, an' by the Lord Harry we'll have him hangin' from a cottonwood limb before midnight!"

"What makes you think he'd be here?" Kinney demanded. He was pale and taut, but completely self possessed. He might have been addressing a class in history, or reading a paper before a literary group. "I know Burt, but I haven't seen him."

CHAPTER VIII

Help Needed

UNOBTRUSIVELY Ross Haney was lounging against the door to the kitchen, his mind working swiftly. They would find him, and there was no earthly way to prevent it. The only chance would be to avert the hanging, to delay it. He knew suddenly that he was not going to see Rolly Burt hang. He didn't know the man, but Burt had won his sympathy by winning a fair fight against two men.

"What are you so all fired wrought up about, Pogue?" he drawled.

Walt Pogue turned square around to face him. "It's you! What part have you got in this?"

Ross shrugged. "None at all! Just wonderin'. Everywhere I been, if a man is attacked an' kills two men against his one, he's figured to be quite a man' not a lynchin' job."

"He killed a Box N man!"

"Sure!" Ross smiled. "Box N men can die as well as any others. It was a fair shake from all I hear. All three had guns, all three did some shootin'. I haven't heard any Reynolds men kickin' because it was two against one. Kind of curious, that. I'm wonderin' why all the RR men are suddenly out of town?"

"You wonder too much!" It was the man from the Springs. "This is none of your deal! Keep out of it!"

Ross Haney still leaned against the door, but his eyes turned to the man from the Springs. Slowly, carefully, contemptuously he looked the rider over from head to heel, then back again. Then he said softly:

"Pogue, you've got a taste for knick-knacks. If you want to take this boy home with you, keep him out of trouble."

The rider took a quick step forward. "You're not running any bluff on me, Haney!"

"Forget it, Voyle! You get to huntin' for Burt. I'll talk to Haney." Pogue's voice was curt.

Voyle hesitated, his right hand hovering over his gun, but Ross did not move, lounging carelessly against the door post, a queer half smile on his face.

With an abrupt movement then, Voyle turned away, speaking quickly over his shoulder. "We'll talk about it later, Haney!"

"Sure," Ross Haney said, and then as a parting he called softly, "Want to bring Dahl with you?"

Voyle caught himself in midstride, and Voyle's shoulders hunched as if against a blow. He stopped and stared back, shock, confusion and puzzlement struggling for expression.

Haney looked back at Pogue. "You carry some characters," he said. "That Voyle now. He's touchy, ain't he?"

"What did you mean about Dahl? He's not one of my riders!"

"Is that right? I thought maybe he was, although I'll admit I didn't know."

Walt Pogue stared at him annoyed and angry, yet puzzled, too. The big man walked back to the table and poured a cup of coffee from the big pot on the stove. He put sugar in it, and then cream. He glanced once over his shoulder at Ross.

Haney felt a slight touch on his shoulder and glanced around and found May at his shoulder.

"He's gone!" she whispered. "He's not there!"

There was dust on her dress and he slapped at it, and she hurriedly brushed it away. "Where was he shot?" he asked, under his breath.

"In the leg. He couldn't go far, I know."

Pogue turned around. "What are you two talking about?" he demanded. "Why the whispering?"

"Is it any of your business?" Haney said sharply.

Walt Pogue stiffened and put his cup down hard. "You'll go too far, Haney! Don't try getting rough with me! I won't take it!"

"I'm not askin' you to!" Ross replied roughly. He straightened away from the door post. "I don't care how you take it. You're not running me or any part of me and you might as well learn that right now. If I choose to whisper to a girl, I'm doin' it on my own time, so keep out of it!"

Pogue stared at him, and then at the girl and there was meanness in his eyes. He shrugged, "It's a small matter. With all this trouble I'm gettin' jumpy."

VOYLE came back into the room accompanied by two other men. "No sign of him, boss. We've been all over the hotel. Simmons an' Clatt went through the vegetable cellar, too, but there ain't a sign of him. There was an empty box under those spuds, though, big enough to hide a man."

Allan Kinney had come back into the room. "What about that, Kinney?"

"Probably somethin' to keep the spuds off the damp ground, much as possible," Haney suggested carelessly. "Seems simple enough."

Pogue's jaw set and he turned swiftly. "You, Haney! Keep out of this! I was askin' Kinney, not you!"

This time Voyle had nothing to say, once Ross glanced at him and the man looked hastily away. "He's scared," Ross told himself mentally. "He's mixed in some deal an' don't want his boss to know it. He's afraid I'll say too much."

Pogue turned and strode from the restaurant, going out through the hotel lobby, his men trooping after him. When the last man was gone, May turned to Kinney. "Allan, where can he *be?* He was there, you know he was there!"

Kinney nodded. "I know." He twisted his hands together. "He must have heard them and got out somehow. But where could he go?"

Ross Haney was already far ahead of them. He was thinking rapidly. The searchers would probably stop for a drink, but they would not stop long. Voyle was apparently in on the plot to have Burt killed, for he had been at the Springs, and this had happened too swiftly. Too little noise had come from the RR for it to be anything but a plot among them. Or so it seemed to Haney. For some reason Rolly Burt had become dangerous to them, and he was intended to die in the gun fight the previous night, but had survived and killed one of their men and wounded another. Now he must be killed, and soon.

Yet Haney was thinking further than that. His mind was going outside into the darkness, thinking of where he would go if he were a wounded man with little ammunition and no time to get away.

He would have to hobble or to drag himself. He would be quickly noticed by anyone and quickly investigated. He would not dare go far without shelter, for there was some light outside even though it was night.

Yet Haney was recalling the stone wall. It started not far from the hotel stables and went around an orchard planted long ago. Some of the stones had fallen, but much of it was intact. A man might make a fair defense from behind that wall, and he could drag himself all of a hundred yards behind it.

Ross walked swiftly out of the hotel through the back door. There in the darkness he stood stock still at the side of the door letting his eyes become accustomed to the night. After a minute or two he could pick out the stable, the orchard, and the white of the stones in the wall.

Walking to the stable, he took the path along its side, then put a hand on the stone wall and dropped over it with a quick vault. Then he stood still once more. If he approached Burt too suddenly the wounded man might mistake him for an enemy and shoot. Nor did he know Burt, or Burt him.

Moving silently, Haney worked his way along the stone wall. It was no more than three feet high and along much of it there was a hedge of weeds and brambles. He ripped a scratch on his hand, then swore. Softly, he moved ahead, and he was almost to the corner when a voice spoke, very low.

"All right, mister, you've made a good guess but a bad one. Let one peep out of you an' you can die."

"Burt?"

"Naw!" the cowhand was disgusted. "This is King Solomon an' I'm huntin' the Queen of Sheba! Who did you think it would be?"

"Listen, an' get this straight the first time. I'm your friend, and a friend of May and Kinney from the hotel. I've

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been huntin' you to help you out of here. There's a horse at May's shack, an' we've got to get you there just as fast as we can make it. You hear?"

"How do I know who you are?"

"I'd have yelled, wouldn't I? If I found you?"

"Onct, maybe. No more than onct though. This Colt still carries a kick. Who are you? I can't see your face."

"I'm Ross Haney. Just blew in."

"The hombre that backed Syd Berdue up? Sure thing, I know you. Heard all about it. It was a good job."

"Can you walk?"

"I can take a stab at it if you give me a shoulder."

"Let's go then."

WITH an arm around Burt's waist, Haney got him over the fence and then down the dark alleyway between it and the stone house next to it. They came out in an open space, and beyond it there was the trail, and then the woods. Once in the shelter of the trees they would have ample concealment all the way to May's house.

Yet once they were started across that open space, any door opened along the backs of the buildings or part of the buildings facing them from across the street would reveal them and they would be caught in the open. There would be nothing for it then but to shoot it out.

"All right, Burt. Here we go! If any door opens, freeze where you are!"

"Where you takin' me?" Supporting himself with a hand on Haney's shoulder, and Haney's arm around his waist, he made a fair shift at hobbling along.

"May's shack. If anything delays me, get there. Take her horse an' light out. You know that old trail to the bad lands?"

"Sure, but it ain't no good unless you circle around to Thousand Springs. No water. An' that's one mighty rough ride."

"Don't worry. I'll handle that. You get over there and find a spot to watch the trail until you see me. But with luck we'll make it together."

Burt's grip on Haney's shoulder tightened. "Watch it! Somebody openin' that door!"

They stopped, standing stockstill. Ross felt Burt's off arm moving carefully, and then he saw the cowhand had drawn a gun. He was holding it across his stomach, covering the man who stood in the light of the open door. It was the bartender.

Somebody loomed over the bartender's shoulder. "Hey! Who's that out there?"

"Go on back to your drinks," the bartender said, "I'll go see." He came down the steps and stalked out toward them, and Haney slid his hand down for his left gun.

The fat man walked steadily toward them until he was close by, he glanced from one face to the other. "Pat," Burt said softly, "you'd make a soft bunk for this lead."

"Don't fret yourself," he said. "If I hadn't come one of those drunken Box N riders would have, an' then what? You shoot me an' you have them all out here. Go on, beat it. I'm not huntin' trouble with any side." He looked up at Haney. "Nor with you, Ross. You don't remember me, but I remember you right well from your fuss with King Fisher. Get goin' now."

He turned and strode back to the door. "What is it?" A drunken voice called. "If it's that Rolly Burt, I'll fix him!"

"It ain't. Just a Mex kid with a horse. Some stray he picked up, an' old crowbait. Forget it!" The door closed.

Ross heaved a sigh. Without further talk, they moved on, hobbling across the open, then into the trees. There they rested. They heard a door slam open. Men came out into the street and started up the path away from them. They had been drinking and were angry. The town of Soledad would be an unpleasant place on this night.

When Haney had the mare saddled, he helped Rolly up. "Start down the trail," he said. "If you hear anybody comin', get out of sight. When I come, I'll be ridin' that palouse of mine. You've seen it?"

"Sure. I'll know it. I keep goin' until you catch up, right?"

"Right. Keep out of sight of anybody else, and I mean anybody. That goes for your RR hands as well. Hear me?"

"Yeah, an' I guess you're right at that. They sure haven't been much help. But I'll not forget what you've done, a stranger, too."

"You ride. Forget about me. I've got

to get back into Soledad an' get my horse out without excitin' comment. Once I get you where I'm takin' you, nobody will find you."

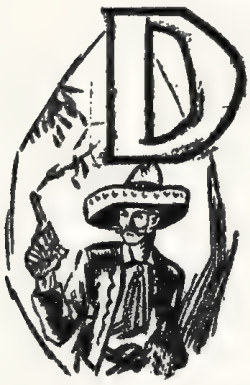
He watched the mare start up the road at a fast walk, and then he turned back toward the town.

He heard shouts and yells, and then a drunken cowhand blasted three shots into the air.

Ross Haney hitched his guns into place and started down the road for Soledad. He was walking fast.

CHAPTER IX

Baited Trap



DISAPPEARANCE of Rolly Burt was a nine day wonder in the town of Soledad and the Ruby Hills. Ross Haney, riding in and out of town, heard the the question discussed and argued from every standpoint. Burt had not been seen in Rico, nor in Pie Town. Nor had any evidence of him been found on the trails.

No horses were accounted missing, and the search of the Box N cowhands had been fruitless if intensive. Neither Allan Kinney nor May asked any questions of Ross, although several times he recognized their curiosity.

The shooting, and the frenzied search that followed had left the town abnormally quiet. Yet the rumor was going around that with the end of the coming roundup, the whole trouble would break open once more and be settled, once and for all. For the time being, with the roundup in the offing, both ranches seemed disposed to ignore the feud and settle first things first.

Second only to the disappearance of Rolly Burt was Ross Haney himself as a topic of conversation. He spent money occasionally, and he came and went around Soledad, but no one seemed to have any idea what he was doing, or what his plans were. Curiosity was growing, and the three most curious men were Walt Pogue, Chalk Reynolds, and Star Levitt. There was another man even more curious, and that one was Emmett Chubb.

It was after the disappearance of Burt that Chubb first heard of Haney's presence in the Ruby Hills. The RR hands ate at one long table presided over by Chalk himself, and Syd Berdue sat always at his right hand.

"Heard Walt Pogue an' his man Voyle had some words with that Haney," Reynolds said to Berdue. "Looks like he's gettin' this country buffaloed."

Berdue went white to the lips and started to make an angry reply when he was cut off by the sudden movement down the table. Emmet Chubb had lunged to his feet. The stocky, hard faced gunman leaned across the table. "Did you say *Haney?*" he rasped. "Would that be Ross Haney?"

"That's right." Reynolds looked up sharply. "Know him?"

Chubb sat back in his chair with a thud. "I should smile I know him! He's huntin' me!"

"You?" Reynolds stared. "Why?"

Chubb shrugged. "Me an' a friend of his had a run in. You knew him. Vin Carter."

"Ah? Carter was a friend of Haney's?" Reynolds chewed in silence. "How good is this Haney?"

"He thinks he's plumb salty. I wouldn't be for knowin', however. Down thataway they sure set store by him."

A slim, dark faced cowhand looked up and drawled softly, "I know him, Emmett, an' when you tangle with him, be ready. He's the hombre who went into King Fisher's hideout in Mexico after a horse one of Fisher's boys stole off him. He rode the horse out, too, an' the story is that he made Fisher take water. He killed the hombre who stole his horse. The fellow was a fool halfbreed who went for his gun."

"So he's chasin' you, Emmett?" Reynolds muttered. "Maybe that accounts for his bein' here."

"An' maybe he's here because of Vin Carter," Berdue said. "If he is, that spells trouble for Pogue. That won't hurt us any."

In the days that had followed the escape of Rolly Burt, Haney had not been idle. He had thrown and branded several of the wild cattle, and had pushed a few of them out into the open valley below Thousand Springs. There would be plenty of time later to bring more of them, all he wanted was for

the brand to show up when the roundup was under way.

Astride the palouse, he headed for the VV. The morning was warm, but pleasant, and he rode down into the shade under the giant old cottonwoods feeling very fit and very happy. Several of the hands were in sight, and one of them was the slope-shouldered Dahl, mending a saddle girth.

BOB VERNON saw him and his brow puckered in a slight frown. He turned and walked toward Ross Haney. "Get down, won't you? Sherry has been telling me something about you."

"Thanks, I will. Is she here?" His purpose had been to verify if he could, some of his ideas about that conversation he had seen and she had overheard at the Springs. Also, he was curious about the setup at the VV. It was the one place he had not catalogued in his long rides.

"Yes," Vernon hesitated, "she's here." He made no move to get her. Suddenly he seemed to make a decision. "I say, Haney. You're not coming with the idea of courting my sister, are you? You know she's spoken for."

"That idea," Haney said grimly, seems to be one everyone wants to sell me. First heard it from Star Levitt."

Vernon's lips tightened. "You mean Star talked to you about Sherry?"

"He did. And Sherry told me she was to marry him."

Bob Vernon appeared relieved. He relaxed. "Well, then you understand how things are. I wouldn't want any trouble over her. Star's pretty touchy."

"Understand this." Haney turned sharply around and faced Bob. "I was told that by Levitt and by Sherry. Frankly, the fact that she is engaged to him doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I haven't told that to her, but you're her brother, and I'm tellin' you. You don't need any long-winded explanations about how I feel about her. When I'm sure she's in love with him, I'll keep away. Until then, I'm in to stay!"

Surprisingly, Vernon did not get angry. He appeared more frightened and worried. "I was afraid of that!" he muttered. "I should have known!"

"Now, if you won't get her for me, I'll go to the house after her!"

"After whom?" They turned swiftly to see Sherry walking toward them, smiling. "Hello, Ross. Who were you coming after? Who could ever make your voice sound like that?"

"You," he said bluntly. "Nobody but you."

Her smile vanished, but there was warmth in her eyes. "That's nice," she said. "You say it as if you mean it."

"I do."

"Boss?" A tall, lean and red-headed cowhand had walked up to them, and when they turned, he asked, "Who has the Gallow's Frame brand?"

"Gallows Frame?" Vernon shrugged. "Never heard of it. Where did you see it?"

"Up toward Thousand Springs. Seen several mighty fine lookin' bulls an' a few cows up thataway an' all wearin' that brand, a gallows frame with a ready noose hangin' from it. An' them cows, why they are wilder'n all get out. Couldn't get nowhere near 'em."

"That's something new," Vernon commented. "Have you seen any of them, Sherry?"

She shook her head, but there was a strange expression in her eyes. She glanced over at Ross Haney, who listened with an innocence combined with humor that would have been a perfect giveaway to anyone who knew him.

"No, I haven't seen any of them, Bob." She looked at the redhead again. "Mabry, have you met Ross Haney? He's new around here, but I imagine he's interested in brands."

Mabry turned to Haney and grinned. "Heard somethin' about you," he said. "Seems you had a run-in with Syd Berdue."

Ross noted that Kerb Dahl's fingers had almost ceased to move in their work on the girth.

Mabry walked away with Bob Vernon and Sherry turned to Ross, her eyes cool but friendly. "I thought you might be interested in knowing Bill Mabry. He was always a good friend of that cowhand they were looking for in town—Rolly Burt."

HANEY'S eyes shifted to her thoughtfully. There seemed to be very little this girl did not know. She would be good to have for a friend, and not at all good as an enemy. She was as intelligent as she was beautiful.

Her eyes never seemed asleep, for she seemed to see everything and to comprehend what she was seeing. Was that a lucky guess about Burt? Or did she know? Would Kinney have told her?

Of course, he recalled, Kinney had said she had suggested him. That might be it. She was guessing.

Dahl's ears were obviously tuned to catch every word, so he turned. "Shall we walk over and sit down?" He took her elbow and guided her to a seat under one of the huge cottonwoods.

"Sherry," he said suddenly, "I told Bob I didn't intend to pay no attention to this engagement of yours unless I found out you were in love with Levitt. Are you?"

She looked away quickly, her face suddenly pale and her lips tight. Finally, she spoke. "Why else would a girl be engaged to a man?"

"I haven't an idea. There might be reasons." He stared at her, and then his eyes strayed to Dahl. "Until you tell me you do, and look me in the eye when you say it, I'm goin' ahead. I want you, Sherry. I want you like I never wanted anything in this world, an' I mean to have you if you could care for me. I'm not askin' you now. Just tellin' you. When I came into this valley I came expectin' trouble, an' I thought I knew all the angles. Well, I've found out there's somethin' more goin' on here than I expected, an' it's somethin' you know about.

"Maybe you don't know it all. I'm bankin' you don't. You heard me talkin' to myself. Well, what I said then goes. I'm here alone, an' I'm ridin' for my own brand, an' you've guessed right, for that Gallows Frame is mine, an' the noose is for anybody who wants to hang on it.

"The RR spread an' the Box N are controlled by a couple of range pirates. They whipped and murdered smaller, weaker men to get what they've got. If they keep it, they'll know they've been in a fight."

Sherry had listened intently. Her face had become serious. "You can't do anything alone, Ross! You must have help!" She put her hand on his arm. "Ross, is Rolly safe? Understand, I am not asking you where he is, just if he is safe. He did me a good turn once, and he's an honest man."

"He's safe. For your own information, and not to be repeated, he's workin' for me now. But he can't do much for another ten days or more an' by that time it may be too late. Can I rely on Mabry?"

"You can. If he will work for you he'll die for you, and kill for you if it's in the right kind of fight. He was Burt's best friend."

"Then if I can talk to him, you'll lose a hand." He looked down at her. "Sherry, what's goin' on here? Who is Star Levitt? Who are those men I saw in town? This Kerb Dahl, and Voyle? I know there's some connection."

She got up quickly. "I can't talk about that. Star Levitt is going to be my husband."

Ross got up, too. Roughly, he picked up his hat and jerked it on his head, then stood there, hands on hips, staring at her.

"Not Levitt!" he said harshly. "Well, if you won't tell me, I'll find out, anyway!"

He turned abruptly, and saw the two men he had seen in town at the restaurant. Kerb Dahl and the shorter, hard faced man.

In that single instant he became aware of many things. Bob Vernon stood in the door, white as death. Kerb Dahl, a hard gleam in his eyes, was on the right and he walked with elbows bent, hands swinging at his gun butts. Behind them Haney could see the big, old tree with a bench around it, and a rusty horseshoe nailed to the trunk. Two saddled horses stood near the corral, and the sunlight through the leaves dappled the earth with shadow.

Behind him there was a low moan of fear from Sherry, but he did not move, but waited and watched the two men coming toward him. It could be here. It could be now. It could be at this moment.

DAHL spoke first, his lean, cadaverous face hard and with a curiously set expression. The shorter man had moved apart from him a little. Haney remembered the girl behind him, and knew he dare not fight—but some sixth sense warned him that somewhere else would be a third man, probably with a rifle. The difference.

Kerb Dahl spoke. "You're Ross Haney. I reckon you know me. I'm Dahl, an' this here is the first time

you've come to the VV an' this is goin' to be the last. You come on this place again an' you get killed. We don't aim to have no trouble-makers around."

Ross Haney held very still, weighing his next words carefully. This could break into a shooting match in one instant. "Then have your artillery ready when I come back," he warned them. "Because when I'm ready, I'll come back."

"We told you."

Ross looked them over coldly, knowing they had expected to find him as tough and ready for a fight as he had been with Chalk Reynolds and Berdue. Yet there was a queer sense of relief in their eyes, too. Haney guessed that while there must be a hidden rifleman, these men were afraid for their skins.

Mabry stood nearby as Ross swung into the saddle. "I've a job for you if you can get to town within the next twelve hours. At the Saloon. You might run into a friend of yours."

Mabry did not reply, so Haney rode away leaving the cowhand standing there. He had spoken softly enough so he knew he was not overheard. Yet Haney knew he was no closer to a solution than before.

There was danger here. An odd situation existed in the Ruby Hills. Scowling, he considered it. On the one hand was Walt Pogue with Bob Streeter and Repp Hanson, two notorious killers. On the other was Chalk Reynolds with Syd Berdue and Emmett Chubb.

Here at the VV was a stranger situation. Bob and Sherry Vernon, who owned the ranch, seemed completely dominated by Levitt and their own hands. Also Levitt had a strong claim of some kind on Sherry herself. What could be behind that? Scowling, Ross considered it. Whatever it was, it could mean everything to him, not only for his plans in the valley, but because of his love for Sherry.

Somewhere in this patchwork of conflicting interests, there was another grouping, that small band who had gathered at the Springs with Syd Berdue. The band was made up of at least one man from each ranch. Of Kerb Dahl of the VV, Voyle of the Box N, and Tolman of the Three Diamonds.

Where did this last group stand? Voyle, from his actions, wanted Pogue to know nothing of his tie-up with Dahl. Did Reynolds know about Berdue's meeting at the Springs? Who was behind it?

CHAPTER X

Narrow Squeak

QUIET reigned at the Bit and Bridle when Ross Haney rode into town in the late afternoon. He left his horse at the rail, and strolled through the half-doors to the cool interior.

Only Pat the bartender was present. The room was dusky and still. Pat idly polished glasses as he came in, and glanced up at him and then put a bottle and a glass on the bar. Ross leaned an elbow on the hardwood and dug out the makings. He built a smoke without speaking, liking the restfulness and coolness after his hot ride, and thinking over what he had seen at the VV.

"You've lived here a long time, Pat?"

"Uh-huh. Before Carter was killed."

"Lots of changes?"

"Lots."

"There's goin' to be more, Pat."

"Room for 'em."

"Where do you stand?"

Pat turned abruptly and fixed his eyes on Haney. "Not in the middle. Not with Reynolds or Pogue. As for you, I'm neither for you nor against you."

"That's plain enough." Haney didn't know whether to be pleased or angry. After Pat's attitude in regard to Burt, he had hoped he might be an ally. "But you don't sound like much help."

"That's right. No help at all. I've got my saloon. I'm doin' all right. I was here before Reynolds and Pogue. I'll be here after they are gone."

"And after I'm gone?"

"Maybe that, too." Pat suddenly turned again and rested his big hands on the bar. "You fool around with Pogue all you want. With Reynolds, too. But you lay off of Star Levitt an' his crowd, you hear? They ain't human. They'll kill you. They'll eat you like a cat does a mouse, when they get ready."

"Maybe." Ross struck a match with his left hand. "Who are his crowd?"

Pat looked disgusted. "You've been to the VV. He runs that spread. Don't you be too friendly with that girl, either. She's poison."

Haney let that one ride. Maybe she was poison. Maybe feeling the way he did about her was the thing that would break him. He was a strong man. He had not lived that long under the conditions he knew without knowing his own strength and knowing how it compared with the strength of others. He knew that when he was sure he would push his luck to any degree, but as yet, he was not pushing it, as yet no one in the Valley knew his real intentions.

Pogue believed he had come looking for Chubb. Reynolds and Berdue, despite their hatred for him, believed he was after Pogue. Each was prepared to keep hands off in hopes he would injure the other. Yet the roundup was going to blow the lid off, for the roundup was going to show that he had cattle on the range, and had pitched his hat into the ring. Then he would be in the middle of the fight with every man's hand against him.

Pat's warning was right. Pogue and Reynolds were dangerous, but nothing to Levitt's crowd. Lifting his glass, Ross studied his reflection in the mirror, the reflection of a tall, wide shouldered young man with blunt, bronzed features and a smile that came easily to eyes that were half cynical, half amused.

He was a tall young man with a flat brimmed, flat crowned black hat and a gray shield chested shirt and a black knotted kerchief, black crossed belts supporting the worn holsters and walnut stocked guns.

He was a fool, he decided, to think as he did about Sherry. What could he offer such a girl?

On the other hand, what could Star Levitt offer her?

Regardless, he was here to stay. When he rode the palouse into the street of Soledad he had come to remain. If he had to back it with gunfire, he would do just that. Carefully, he considered the state of his plans. There was no fault to find there. In fact, he had progressed beyond where he had expected in that he had a friend, an ally, a man who would stay with him to the last ditch.

He had Rolly Burt.

CAMPING on the mesa, the wounded man was rapidly knitting. They had talked much, and Burt had told him what to expect of the roundup. He knew the characters and personalities of the people of the Ruby Hills, and he knew something more of Pogue and Reynolds. Over nights beside the campfire they had yarned and argued and talked. Both of them had rode for Goodnight, both for John Chisum. They knew the same saloons in Tacosa and El Paso. Both had been over the trail to Dodge and to Cheyenne.

Both had been in Uvalde and Laredo, and they talked the nights away of cattle and horses, of rustling and gunfighters until they knew each other, and knew they spoke the same language. Rolly had talked much of Mabry. He was a good man. While Mabry liked both Bob and Sherry Vernon, he had confided to Burt that he must leave the VV or be killed.

"Why were the Box N boys gunnin' for you, Rolly?"

A frown gathered between Rolly Burt's eyes. He looked up at Ross over the fire. His blue eyes were puzzled and disturbed. "You know, I can't figure that. It was a set deal. I saw that right away. They'd been sent to murder me."

"How'd you happen to be in town?"

"Berdue sent me in for a message."

"I see." Ross told him then about the meeting below the mesa, and everything but Sherry's part in it. "There's a tie up there somewhere. I think Berdue sent you in on purpose, an' he had those Box N boys primed to kill you."

"But why?"

"Something you know, probably. The way I have it figured is that Syd Berdue is in some kind of a double-cross that he don't want Chalk to know about. Maybe he figured he'd tipped his hand somehow, and you knew too much. Voyle is in the deal with him, and I figured from the way he acted the other night in front of Pogue that he's double-crossing Walt. And I think Star Levitt is the man behind the whole thing!"

"You mean a deal between Berdue and Levitt? But they are supposed to be on the outs."

"Sure, and what better cover up? You keep an eye on the Springs. They may meet again."

"Say!" Burt glanced up. "Something

I've been meaning to ask you. Several times I've heard a funny kind of rumbling, sounds like it comes out of the rock under me. You heard it?"

"Uh-huh. Don't reckon it amounts to much, but some day we'll do some prowling. Kind of gives an hombre the shivers."

Standing now at the Bit and Bridle bar, Ross Haney went over that conversation. Yes, he was ahead of his plans in having such an ally as Rolly Burt.

He leaned his forearms on the hardwood and turned his head to glance out into the street. The rose of the setting sun had tinted the dusty, unpainted boards of the old building opposite with a dull glow, and beyond it, in the space between the buildings, a deep shadow had already gathered. At the rail, Rio stamped his feet against a vagrant fly and blew contentedly.

It was a quiet evening. Suddenly, he felt a vague nostalgia, a longing for a home he had never known, the deep, inner desire for peace, his children about him, the quiet evening rest on a wide porch after a hard day on the range, and the sound of a voice inside, a voice singing.

Yet when he straightened and filled his glass again, the guns felt heavy against his legs.

Some day, with luck, things would be different.

Then the half-doors pushed open, and Star Levitt stood there, tall and handsome against the fading light. He looked for an instant at Ross, and then came on into the room.

He wore the same splendid white hat, a white buckskin vest, and perfectly creased gray trousers tucked into polished boots.

As always, the worn guns struck the only incongruous note. His voice was easy, confident.

"Thanks. I've got one." In the mirror his eyes caught the difference between them, his battered shabbiness against the cool magnificence of Levitt.

LEVITT'S smile was pleasant, his voice ordinary and casual. "Planning to leave soon?"

"No." Haney's voice was flat. "I'm never going to leave."

"That's what the country needs, they tell me. Permanent settlers, somebody to build on. It's a nice thought, if you can stick it."

"That's right. How about you, Levitt? Do you think you'll be able to stick it when Reynolds and Pogue get to checking brands?"

He heard a glass rattle in Pat's suddenly nervous fingers. He knew he had taken the play away from Levitt with that remark, and he followed it up. "I've been over the range, lately, and there's a lot of steers out there with VV's made over into Three Diamonds, an' Box N's to Triple Box A's, an' I understand that brand happens to be yours, too."

Levitt had straightened and was looking at him, all the smile gone from his face. "You understand too much, Haney! You're getting into water that's too deep for you, or for any drifting cowhand!"

"Am I? Let me judge. I've waded through some bad water a few times, an' where I couldn't wade, I could swim."

STAR LEVITT'S eyes had widened and the bones seemed to stretch the skin of his face taut and hard. He was not a man used to being talked back to, and he wasn't used to being thwarted. He was shrewd, a planner, but in that instant, Ross learned something else of him.

He had a temper, and when pushed, he got angry. Such a man was apt to be hasty. All right, Ross told himself, let's see.

"Another thing: you spoke the other day about a staked claim. I'm curious to see how deep your stakes are driven, so I'm going to find out for myself, Levitt. I don't think that claim is very secure. I think a little bit of bad weather an' all your stakes would shake loose. You're a big boy, Levitt, but you're not cutting the wide swath you think you are. Now you know where I stand, so don't try running any bluffs on me. I won't take a pushing around!"

"Stand aside, Star, an' let me have him!" The voice rang in an almost empty room, and Haney's hair prickled along his scalp as he saw Emmett Chubb standing just inside the door. "I want him, anyway, Star!"

Ross Haney stood, his feet wide apart, facing them and he knew he was in the tightest spot of his life. Two of the

deadliest gunmen in the country were facing him, and he was alone. Cold and still he waited, and the air was so tense he could hear the hoarse breathing of the bartender beside him and across the bar.

So still was the air in the room that Bill Mabry's voice, low as it was, could be heard by all.

"If they want it, Haney, I'll take Star for you. He's right here under my gun."

Levitt's eyes did not waver. Haney saw the quick calculation in the big man's eyes, then saw decision. Levitt was sharp, and this situation offered nothing for anybody. It was two and two, and Mabry's position at the window from which he spoke, commanded the situation perfectly, as he was just slightly behind both Levitt and Chubb.

IT was Pat who broke the stalemate. "Nobody does any shootin' here unless it's me!" he said flatly. "Mabry, you stand where you are. Chubb, you take your hand away from that gun an' get out of that door, face first. Star, you foller him. I ain't aimin' to put clean sawdust on this here floor again today. Now git!"

He enforced his command with the twin barrels of a shotgun over the edge of the bar, and nobody had any argument with a shotgun at close quarters. A six-gun warrants a gamble, but there is no gamble with a sawed-off scattergun.

Chubb turned on his heel and strode from the room, and Star smiled suddenly, but his eyes were cold as they turned to Haney. "You talk a good fight," he said. "We'll have to see what you're holding!"

"All right," Ross replied shortly. "I'll help you check brands at the roundup!"

Levitt walked out, and then Bill Mabry put a foot through the open window, and stepped into the bar. He grinned.

"That job open?"

Haney laughed.

"Friend, you've been working for me for the last three minutes!" he declared warmly.

"You two finish your drinks and pull out," Pat said dryly. "Powder smoke gives me a headache!"

CHAPTER XI

Sinister Signs

GATHERED over the fire in the hollow atop the mesa, crouched three men, not daring to use the partly constructed house as the glow of the fire might attract attention. Here, in a more sheltered position far back from the rim, they could talk in quiet and without fear of the fire attracting undue attention.

Burt, whose leg was much better, was cooking. "It ain't all clear, Ross, but I think you've got the right idea. It looks like Levitt is engineerin' some kind of a steal if Voyle, Dahl an' Berdue are in it with him. I do know this: there's been a passel of hard cases comin' into the valley here lately. They ain't all tied in with the Box N or the RR by any means."

"Sure, look at Streeter an' Hanson. They are with Pogue, but how far can he count on 'em? I think Streeter an' Hanson will stay out of things if Levitt says to. I think he's cut the ground from under the feet of both men."

"Those brands I've looked at aren't intended to fool anybody, it seems to me," Haney commented. "I think Levitt plans to start trouble. It's my opinion that he'll blow the lid off things just when the rest of them are standin' by for the roundup. How many reliable hands has Vernon got?"

"Three or four. Dahl and his partner ran several off. A man sure don't feel comfortable workin' around a ranch with two hombres on the prod like that."

"What goes on around there?" Haney asked Mabry. "You've lived on that spread, an' should know."

Mabry shrugged. "I sure don't know," he said honestly. "Seems to be a lot of movin' around at night on that spread, but Dahl or his partner are usually by the door, an' they go out to see what it's all about. Several times at night riders have showed up there, leavin' hard ridden horses behind when they take off. No familiar brands but one. That I think I've seen down Mexico way."

Ross took the plate he was handed

and dished up some frijoles and then accepted the coffee Burt poured for him. There seemed to be but one answer. He would have to do some night riding and look around a little. Maybe he could figure it out. After all, there couldn't be many possibilities.

"Well," Burt suggested at last, "the roundup starts tomorrow. Before it has gone very far, we'll know a lot of things."

From the rim of the mesa they watched all the following morning. Reynolds' hands were rounding up cattle, driving them out of the timber and down into the flat. Some of the Box N riders were part of the group.

The weather was hot and dry, and dust arose in clouds. The cattle moved from the shade and ample water of the Springs with reluctance. As always, it gave Ross a thrill to watch the cattle gathered and to see a big herd moving. He kept back and out of sight but took turns with Mabry at watching the work.

Regardless of their sympathies, there were good cattlemen on both sides. The riders got the cattle out of the brakes and started them down valley to the accompaniment of many yells, much shouting back and forth and the usual good natured persiflage and joking that is part of any roundup crew. As far as his glass was able to see, the same thing was happening. There would be several thousand head of stock to work in this roundup, and it would move on down the range for many miles before completed.

Mabry slid up alongside of him at noon on the second day. "You want me to rep for you, or will you tackle it your own self?"

Haney thought a minute. "We'll both go down, but we'll go loaded for bear. I think hell is going to break loose down there before many days."

"If they start to fight, what do we do?" Mabry asked keenly.

"Pull out. We don't have a battle with any of them. Not yet, we don't, but almost any of them might take a shot at us. When they see what's happened, that I've got cattle on this range, they aren't going to be too happy about it."

"Have you seen Scott?"

"Only for a minute or two. He's advisin' me to get more hands, but I don't want anybody killed, neither of you nor myself, either. If there's only three of us we'll play our cards the way we should, close to our belt. If there were more we might take chances and get somebody killed. If they start a battle, pull out."

"Don't you rate that Levitt too low," Haney." Mabry shook his head seriously. "He's cold-blooded, and he'll do whatever he's a mind to, to get his way on this range. He hasn't any use for either Pogue or Reynolds, but he's a sight worse than either of them."

IT was good advice, and the following day when the two drifted down off the mesa toward the roundup, Ross Haney was thinking about it.

"Remember one thing," he advised Mabry. "We may not be together all the time. Don't let yourself get sucked in. Hold to the outer edge all the time, and keep an eye on the hands we've talked about whom we believe to be tied in with Levitt. I wouldn't be surprised at anything. If they start scattering out, and seem to be taking up any definite positions, ease out of there quick!"

Walt Pogue looked unhappy when he saw the two riding up. Then he brightened noticeably. "You two hunting work? I need some men."

"No," Haney noted that Chalk Reynolds was riding over. "I've come to rep for my brand."

Pogue's head came down and his eyes squinted. He leaned toward them, and his somewhat thick lips parted. "Did you say—*your* brand?"

"That's right—the Gallows Frame."

The big rancher's face went white, then darkened with a surge of blood. He reined his horse around violently. "Who said you could run cattle on this range?"

Ross Haney shrugged. Chalk Reynolds looked as astonished and angry as Pogue. "Does anybody have to say so? Strikes me this here is government land, and my stock has as much right to run on it as yours, an' maybe more right."

"You'll find there's a difference of opinion on that!" Chalk Reynolds put in violently. "This range is overcrowded now."

"Tell that to Star Levitt. He's on it, with two brands."

This was obviously no news to either of them, but neither had anything to say for a minute, and then Reynolds said coldly, "Well, he'll be told! From what I hear somebody's doin' some mighty smooth work with a cinch ring!"

Ross hooked his leg around the saddle horn and began to dig for the makings. "Reynolds, if you an' Pogue will take a look at those altered brands, you'll see that whoever altered them doesn't give a hoot whether you know it or not. He's throwin' it right in your face, an' askin' what you intend to do!"

"I'll do plenty!" Chalk bellowed. "There's goin' to be a new setup on this range after this roundup is over!"

"You throwin' that at me?" Pogue demanded. Fury was building in the man, and he was staring at Reynolds with an ugly light in his eye.

"Why don't you two either go to it or cut it out?" Haney drawled. "Or are you both afraid of Levitt? He's the hombre who's cuttin' in on you. He doesn't even bother to bring his own cows, he brands yours!"

Ross chuckled, and Reynolds' face went white, he turned and said flatly, the rage trembling behind his even tones. "We might get together, Walt an' I, long enough to get shut of you!"

"Take first things first," Ross said. "An' you'd better learn this right now, Chalk. An' you, too, Pogue. I came here to stay. If you fellows stay here, it will be with me alongside of you. If you go, I'll still be here. I didn't come to this valley by chance. I came here on purpose, and with a definite idea in mind. Any bet you make, I'll double and raise. So any time you want to get into the game with me, just start the ball rolling, anyway you like!"

He struck a match and lighted his smoke, then dropped his leg back and kicked his foot into the stirrup. Coolly, and without a backward glance, he rode away.

Bill Mabry sat quietly for a minute or two, watching him ride.

Pogue glared at him. "What's in this, Bill? You've always been a good man."

"You listen to him," Mabry advised dryly. "He's mucho malo hombre, if you get what I mean. But only when he's crossed. He's got no reason to like either of you, but he's got other things on his mind now. But in case either of you wonder where I stand. Me an' my six-gun, we stand right alongside of Ross Haney. And that's where you'll find Rolly Burt, too!"

"Burt?" Pogue's face flamed. "Where is that murderin' son?"

BILL MABRY turned, his hand on the cantle of the saddle: "Listen, why don't you find out why two of your men were gunning for him, Pogue? I'll bet a paint pony you don't know! An' why don't you, Chalk Reynolds, find out why none of your boys were in town that night to side Burt? Why did your nephew send him into town with a message?"

Mabry turned and cantered his horse over to Ross. "I gave 'em some more," he said briefly, and explained.

Haney chuckled. "Their ears will be buzzing for a week if they live that long. Some nice stock here, Bill, at that."

"How many head have you got out here?"

"Not many. Couple of dozen head is all. Just something to make them unhappy."

"Suppose they start to get sore? Reynolds an' Pogue both can be mighty mean."

"We'll get meaner. I've got them cold-decked, Bill. Some day I'll tell you about it. I've got them all cold-decked. The only way they can beat me in the long run is with hot lead."

"Maybe. But that Star Levitt is poison."

"You think Pogue and Reynolds will get through the roundup without a fight?"

"No. There's too much hard feelin' amongst the boys. Somebody will blow his top and then the whole thing will bust up in a shootin' match."

Ross Haney looked across the valley, watching the familiar scene with a little of the old lift within him. This was the roundup, the hardest work in a cowhand's life, and in many ways, the highest point. They cussed the roundup, and loved it. It was hot, dusty, full of danger from kicking hoofs and menacing horns, but filled with good fellowship and comradely fun.

The waving sea of horns tossed and rolled and fell as the cattle milled or the herd, starting to line out for somewhere, anywhere, was turned back on itself by some cowhand quick to stop

the movement. At such times the horns would send a long ripple of movement across the herd.

Wild eyed steers lunged for a getaway, but were quickly harried back into the herd. At the branding pens men were gathered, the sharp line of demarcation between the RR and Box N a little broken here by the business of the day. Elsewhere, the men from the two big outfits drew off to themselves worked together, and avoided contact with the rival ranch hands.

Star Levitt, astride a magnificent white horse, was everywhere to be seen. For a time he was at the branding pens, and then he was circling the herd. Finally, sighting Ross Haney and Mabry, he walked his horse toward them. Ross saw Mabry stiffen and saw the cowhand's face tighten and grow cold. Certainly, there was no love lost here.

"How are you, Haney?" Levitt was easy, casual. He seemed to have forgotten completely the events of the day in the Bit and Bridle. He was clean shaven as always, and as always he was immaculate. The dust of the roundup seemed scarcely to have touched him.

Mabry, glancing at the two, was struck for the first time at something strikingly similar in the two men, only there was a subtle difference that drew the cowhand inexorably to Ross Haney.

Both were big men, Levitt the taller and heavier, and probably somewhat softer. Ross was lean and hard, his rugged build seeming so lean as to belie his actual weight, which was some two hundred pounds. Yet in the faces of both men there was strength, and in the faces of both men there was the look of command. Haney's manner was easy, and careless, yet there was something solid about him, something rock-like that was lacking in the brittle sharpness of Star Levitt.

These two were shaped by nature to be enemies, two strong men with their faces turned in the same direction, yet backed by wholly varied thinking. The one ruthless and relentless, willing to take any advantage, willing to stop at nothing. The other, hard, toughened by range wars and fighting, with the rough-handed fair play of the western plains, yet equally relentless. It could be something, Mabry thought, if they ever came together in physical combat.

ROSS began building a smoke. "Looks like a good herd. You got many cows here?"

"Quite a few." Levitt glanced at him sharply. "I hear you have some, too. That you're running the Gallows Frame brand."

"That's right." Ross lighted his smoke and eased his seat on the palouse. "It's a good brand."

"Seems so. Strange that I hadn't heard of any cattle coming into the country lately. Did you pick yours up on the range?"

At many times in many places such a remark would have meant shooting. After Haney's equally insulting remarks in the Bit and Bridle they were not important. These two knew their time was coming, and neither was in a rush. Levitt was completely, superbly confident. Ross hard and determined, his hackles raised by this man, his manner always verging on the outrightly aggressive.

"No, I didn't need to. Your pattern suits you, mine suits me." He inhaled deeply and let the smoke trickle out through his nostrils. "My cattle were already here."

The remark drew the response he wanted. It was a quick, nervous and irritable scowl from Levitt. "That's impossible!" he said. "Only three brands ran on this range until I moved in!"

Haney smiled, knowing his enigmatic smile and manner would infuriate Levitt.

"Star," he drawled, "you're an hombre that figures he's right smart, an' you might be if you didn't figure the other fellow was so all-fired dumb.

"A man like you ain't got a chance to win for long in any game for that reason. You take everybody for bein' loco or dumb as a month-old calf. You ride into everything full of confidence an' sneers. You're like most crooks. You think everything will turn out right for you. Why, you're so wrong it don't need any argument!

"You came into this country big an' strong. You were goin' to be the boss. You saw Reynolds an' Pogue, an' you figured them for easy marks. You maybe had something on the Vernons, I haven't figured that out yet, but like so many crooks you overlooked the obvious.

"Let me tell you something, my cut-

throat friend, an' get it straight: you lost this fight before you started. You might win with bullets, that's still anybody's guess, but you'll lose. You're smart in a lot of ways, an' if you were really smart you'd turn that horse of yours and start out of this country an' never stop until you're five hundred miles east of Tascosa."

Levitt smiled, but the smile was forced. For the first time the big man was uneasy, yet it was only for a moment. "I may not be as smart as I think, Haney, but no four-bit cowhand is going to out-smart me."

Ross turned slightly. "Bill, let's drift down toward the pens. I want to see what Reynolds an' Pogue think of those altered brands."

CHAPTER XII

Roundup Massacre

NONCHALANTLY Haney turned his back on Levitt and started away. Mabry rode beside him, occasionally stealing a glance his way. "Boss, you're sure turnin' the knife in that hombre. What you aimin' to do, force his hand?"

"Somethin' like that. It does me good just to goad him. But you keep your eyes open, because he's got something cookin' now. I only wish," his brow creased with worry, "I knew what he had on the Vernons. You don't suppose she really cares for that hombre, do you?"

Mabry shrugged. "I can guess what a fool cow will do, an' I can out guess a bronc, but keep me away from women. I never could read the sign right to foller their trail. Just when you think you can read the brand, they turn the other way an' it looks altogether different."

Despite the growing sense of danger, the roundup was moving very well, yet the tenseness of the riders for all the brands was becoming increasingly evident. Several times Ross saw Sherry, but she avoided him. Bob Vernon was there, working like any of his men, and showing himself to be a fair hand, and a very willing one. Yet as his eyes roved the herd, and searched the faces of the riders, Ross could see that under the heat, the irritating confusing dust, and the hard labor, that tempers were growing short.

On the third day, when the roundup had moved to the vicinity of Soledad, the break came. He had been trying to find a chance to talk to Sherry, and suddenly, he saw it. The girl had been talking with Levitt. She had started away from him, riding toward the cottonwoods that marked the VV ranch house.

Ross started after her, and noticed Kerb Dahl, his hard, lupine face set grimly, staring after him. Dahl had drawn aside from the crowd, and was building a smoke. Mabry, who had been working hard all morning, was still in the center of things, but Voyle was saddling a fresh horse.

Haney overtook Sherry and she looked up at him. He noticed for the first time how thin she had grown and how white her face was.

"Sherry?" Surprisingly, his voice was unsteady. "Wait a minute."

She drew up, waiting for him, but he thought she waited without any desire for conversation. She said nothing as he rode alongside. "Leaving so soon?"

She nodded. "Star said the men were getting pretty rough in their talk, and they'd be more comfortable if I went in."

"I've been hoping I'd have a chance to talk to you. You've been avoiding me." His eyes were accusing, but bantering.

She looked at him directly then, "Yes, Ross, I have. We must not see each other again. I'm going to marry Star, and seeing you won't do."

"You don't love him." The statement was flat and level, but she avoided his glance, and made no response.

Then suddenly she said, "Ross, I've go to go. Star insisted I leave right away."

Haney's eyes hardened. "Do you take orders from him? What is this, anyway? Are you a slave? Haven't you a chance to make up your own mind?"

Her face reddened and she was about to make a quick, and probably angry retort, when her remark hit him. He seized her wrist. "Sherry, you say Star *insisted?* That you leave *now?*"

"Yes," she was astonished and puzzled by his expression. "He said—"

The remark trailed off, for Ross Haney had turned sharply in his saddle. Kerb Dahl had finished his cigarette. Voyle was fumbling with his saddle girth, and for the first time, Haney noticed that he carried a rifle in his saddle scabbard, a rifle within inches of his hands. Ross' eyes strayed for the white horse, and found it on the far side.

He turned quickly. "Sherry, he's right. Get back to that ranch as fast as you can, and don't leave it!"

He wheeled his horse and started back toward the branding pens at a rapid canter, hoping he would be in time. A small herd of cattle was drifting down toward the pens, and behind it was Streeter and Repp Hanson.

AS HE drew up on the edge of the branding, Mabry was just straightening up from slapping a brand on a steer. "Bill!" Haney had to speak three times before Mabry heard him, and then the red-headed cowhand turned and walked toward him. "Look out, Bill! It's coming."

His remark might have been a signal, for Emmett Chubb, sitting his horse near the corral on the outside of the pole fence, spoke up and pointed his remark at Riggs, a Box N rider. "You all feet, or just nat'rally dumb?"

Riggs looked up sharply. "What's the matter with you, Chubb? I haven't seen you down here doin' any work!"

Riggs was a slim, hard faced youngster and a top hand. His anger was justifiable and he was not thinking or caring who or what Chubb was. Riggs had worked while the gunman lounged in his saddle, carrying his perpetual sneer.

"Shucks!" Chubb said. "You Box N hands done enough work afore the roundup, slappin' brands on everythin' in sight! Bunch of tinhorn cow-thieves!"

"You're a liar!" Riggs snapped, and Chubb's hand fiashed for his gun. At that, Riggs almost made it. His gun was coming up when Chubb's first shot smashed him in the middle. He staggered back, gasping fiercely. struggling to get his gun up.

Instantly, the branding pens were bursting with gunfire. Mabry swung into the saddle and whipped his horse around the corner of the stock pens and he and Ross Haney headed for the timber. "It's their fight," Mabry said bitterly. "Let them have it!"

"Look!" Haney was pointing.

Mabry glanced over his shoulder as the firing burst out, and his face went hard and cold.

Streeter and Hanson from their saddles, had opened up on Reynolds and Pogue. Voyle was firing over the saddle of his horse, and cattle were scattering in every direction. Dust arose in a thick cloud. From it came the scream of a man in agony, then another burst of firing.

Mabry gasped out an oath. The freckles were standing out against the dead white of his face. "Pogue's own men turned on him!"

"Yeah," Ross Haney hurled his cigarette into the dust. "We'd better light a shuck. I think they intended to get us, too!"

The crash of guns stopped suddenly, but the scene was obscured by dust from the crazed cattle and excited horses. Ross saw a riderless horse, stirrups flopping, come from the dust cloud, head high and reins trailing. Behind them there was a single shot, then another.

Finally, with miles behind them, Mabry looked over at Ross. "I feel like a coyote ridin' away from a fight, like that, but it sure wasn't none of ours."

Haney nodded grimly. "I saw it comin' but never guessed it would break out just like that. It couldn't be stopped without killin' Levitt."

"You think he engineered it?"

"Sure." Haney explained how Levitt had started Sherry home, and how his riders had moved out of the working men's group to good firing positions. "Chubb had his orders. He deliberately started that fight when he got the signal."

"I'll get him if it's the last thing I do!" Mabry said, bitterly. "That Riggs was a good hand. We hunted strays together."

"There was nothing we could have done but stay there an' die. We've got other things to do, Bill. We've got to see that Levitt's plans go haywire an' that he gets his desserts. We've got to get the Vernons out from under. Star will have this country sewed up now, with no one able to buck him but us. He'll rave when he finds we got away."

"As far as Reynolds an' Pogue," Mabry said, "I can't feel no sorrow. They were a couple of murderin' wolves, but they had some good men ridin' for 'em."

Mabry scowled. "Wonder what Levitt will do now? He's got the range sewed up with them two out of the way an' the Vernons knucklin' under to him."

ROSS frowned. He had thought that over and believed he knew the answer. "That we'll have to wait an' see," Haney said. "I'm right curious, myself. He'll hunt us, an' we'll have to lay low. He'll blame the whole thing on the feud between the two big outfits an' claim he was just an innocent bystander."

"What about the riders?" Mabry protested. "Some of them will tell the truth!"

"Bill," Haney said, "I'd lay a good bet none of them know. We knew pretty well what was comin', an' moreover we got off to one side with a clear view. Down there among the stampedin' cows, the dust an' shootin', I'll bet the ones who are alive won't know. Moreover, I'll bet most of them drift out of the country.

"If they don't drift," Haney added, "Levitt will probably see that they do. From his standpoint it's foolproof. Remember, too, that Levitt's gunmen were men from both outfits."

"If he kills like that," Mabry asked, "what chance have three men got?"

"The best chance, Bill. We're still honest men even if the only law is gunlaw. We'll wait an' see what Levitt does, but I imagine the first thing he'll do will be to clean up the loose ends. He may even call in the law from outside so he'll be in the clear with a clean bill of health."

Rolly Burt was waiting for them when they rode in. "What happened?" he demanded. "Did the lid blow off? I heard shootin'."

Briefly, Haney explained. "The fight would have come, I expect, even if Levitt hadn't planned it."

"How many were killed?"

"No tellin'. I doubt if so many. Enough to warrant Levitt playin' the big, honest man who wants to keep the peace. Down there in the dust, I doubt if anybody scored many good shots. Too much confusion and too many running cattle. Riggs is probably dead."

"Murderin' coyotes!" Burt limped to the fire. "Set an' eat. I've got the grub ready."

He dished up the food, then straightened, fork in hand. "Ross, what happened to Chalk?"

Haney did not look up. "He's sure to be dead. So's Pogue. Even Syd Berdue was shootin' at them. Killed his own uncle, or lent a hand."

"Chalk was no good, but no man deserves that."

Burt looked up suddenly. "Boss, while you two were gone I done some stumpin' around to loosen the muscles in this here game leg, an' guess what I found?"

"What?" Haney dished up a forkful of beans, then looked over it at Rolly, struck by something in his tone.

"That rumblin' in the rock. I found what causes it!" he said. "An' man, when you see it, your hair'll stand on end, I'm a tellin' you!"

CHAPTER XIII

Cavern of Terror

YAWNING Ross Haney opened his eyes to look through the aspen leaves at a cloudless sky. The vast expanse of blue stretched above them as yet unfired by the blazing heat of the summer sun. He rolled out of his soogan and dressed, trying to keep his feet out of the dew covering the grass.

Bill Mabry stuck a head bristling with red hair, all standing on end out of his blankets and stared unhappily at Haney.

"Rolly," he complained, "what can a man do when his boss gets up early? It ain't neither fittin' nor right, I say."

"Pull your head back in then, you sorrel-topped bronc!" Haney growled. "I'm goin' to have a look at the Valley, an' then Rolly can roll out an' scare up some chuck."

"How about this all fired rumblin'?" Mabry sat up. "I heard it again last night. Gives a man the creeps."

Burt sat up and looked around for his boots. He rubbed his unshaven jowls as he did every morning and muttered:

"Dang it, I need a shave!"

"Never seen you when you didn't." Mabry thrust his thumb through a hole in his sock and swore, then pulled it on. "You need a haircut, too, you durned Siwash. Ugly, that's what you are! What a thing to see when you first wake up! Lucky you never hitched up with no girl. She sure would have had you curried and combed to a fare thee well!"

Ross left them arguing and picking up his glass, walked to the nest of boulders he used for a lookout. Settling down on his stomach in the sand, he pointed the glass down valley.

At first, all seemed serene and beautiful. The morning sunlight sparkled on the pool below, and the sound of the running water came to his ears. Somewhere, far off, a cow bawled. He swept the edge of the trees close at hand, studied the terrain below, and then bit by bit he eased his line of quest up until he was looking well down range toward the Soledad trail.

The sun felt good on his back, and he squirmed to shift his position a little, leveled the glass, then froze.

A group of horsemen were coming up the trail toward Thousand Springs, riding slowly. Star Levitt, he made out, was not among them. As they drew nearer, he picked out first one and then another. They were led by Syd Berdue, and Kerb Dahl and Voyle were with him. Also, Emmett Chubb and half dozen other riders. As they drew rein below him and let their horses drink, a few words drifted up to him.

This time they were making no secret of their conversation, and in the bright morning air, their words were, for the most part, plain enough.

"Beats all where he got to!" Voyle complained. "One minute both of them were there, an' then they were gone."

"We'd better find 'em," Dahl replied. "I never did see Starr so wrought up about anythin' as when he found they'd got away. He must have turned over everything in the flat, a huntin' 'em. Refused to believe they'd got away. Golly was he mad!"

"He's a bad man to cross," Streeter commented. "I never seen him mad before. He goes crazy."

Chubb hung at one edge of the group, taking no part in their talking. His eyes strayed toward Berdue from time to time. Finally, he swung down and walked to one of the springs for a drink, and when he came back, wiping his mouth, his eyes shifted from one to the other. "Some things about this I don't like," he said.

There was no reply. Watching, Ross had the feeling that Chubb expressed the view of more than one of them. Syd idly flicked his quirt at a mesquite.

"Well, you can't say he ain't thorough!" he said grimly.

Chubb looked around. "Yeah," he agreed sarcastically. "But how thorough? Where does his bein' thorough stop? You ever start to figure like that? He had me primed to start the play by gunnin' Riggs, as he had Riggs pegged as a hot head who would go for a gun if pushed. Well, I hadn't no use for Riggs, my ownself, but he never told me what was to come after. It was pure luck I didn't get killed!"

"Where do you reckon Haney went?" Dahl demanded, changing the subject.

"Where did Rolly Burt go?" Voyle asked. "You ask me, that Ross Haney is nobody's fool. He an' Mabry sure got shut of those brandin' pens in a hurry! They lit out like who flunk the chunk. Maybe left the country."

"He shore didn't!" Chubb said bitterly. "He wants my scalp! He'll not leave if I read his tracks right."

"He called the boss a couple of times," Voyle said. "Pogue, too. Don't seem to take no water for anybody."

SYD BERDUE'S eyes shifted from face to face, waiting for somebody to mention his own fuss with Haney, but they avoided his eyes. "I'd say the thing to do would be to stop chasin' over the country an' keep an' eye on that Kinney feller. He was right friendly with Haney, they tell me."

"Or Sherry Vernon!" Berdue sneered. "I think the boss is buckin' a stacked deck with her."

Watching from the mesa, and listening to the faint sound of their voices, Ross could see Kerb's eyes shifting from man to man. He shook his own head, disgusted.

"They talk too much," he told himself, "that Dahl will tell Levitt every word or I miss my guess. He wasn't planted on the VV for nothing."

Long after the group rode away, he lay there restlessly, hoping for some sight of Sherry, but there was none.

More than he cared to admit, he was worried about her. Star Levitt had been revealed as a much more ruthless man, and a more cruel man than he had believed.

Perhaps of them all, Emmett Chubb was the nearest to correct in his estimation of Levitt's character.

There was small chance he would ever allow any of the group below to escape the valley to talk and repeat what they knew over too many glasses of whiskey. He was thorough, and he would be thorough enough, and hard enough, to carry out what he had started.

Yet there was little Haney could do until Levitt's next move was revealed. Reynolds and Pogue were gone and the Ruby Hills country lay in the big man's palm.

Haney longed for a talk with Scott, for the old storekeeper was a shrewd judge of men, and he listened much and heard everything.

Returning to the fire, he joined Burt and Mabry in eating a quick breakfast. "Now," he said as he finished his last cup of coffee, "We'll see what you've got to show us. Then Mabry an' me will go down into the lava an' push out some more cows. We've got to keep Levitt sweatin'."

Burt, whose leg was rapidly returning to normal, led them through the aspens to the open mesa, and then along its top toward the jumbled maze of boulders that blocked off any approach from the northwest except by the narrow trail Haney used in coming and going.

The way Burt took followed a dim pathway into the boulders and ended at a great leaning slab of granite under which there was a dark, chill looking opening.

"Come on," he said. "We're going down here!" He had brought with him several bits of candle, and now he passed one to each of them. They stooped, and crept into the hole. The air felt damp inside, and there was a vast, cavernous feeling as of a dark, empty space. Holding their candles high, they saw they were on a steep floor that led away ahead of them, going down and down into an abysmal darkness from which came the faint sound of falling water.

Burt hobbled along ahead of them, and they had descended seventy or eighty feet below the level of the mesa above, when he paused on the rim of a black hole. Leaning forward, Ross Haney saw a bottomless blackness from which there came at intervals a strange sighing and then a low rumble.

"We got maybe ten minutes, the way I figure it," Burt said. "And then to be on the safe side, we've got to get out." He knelt and touched the rock at the edge of the hole. "Look how smooth! Water done that, water falling on it for years an' years!

"I tried to time it yesterday, an' it seems to come about every three hours. Pressure must build away down inside the mountain somehow, an' then she blows a cork an' water comes a spoutin' an' a spumin' out of this hole. She shoots cl'ar up, nigh to the roof, and she keeps a spoutin' for maybe three, four minutes. Then it dies away, an' that's the end."

"Well, I'm doggoned!" Mabry exclaimed. "I've heard about this place! Injuns used to call it the Talkin' Mountain. Heard the Navajos speak of it afore I ever came over here."

"Stones come up on that water, too, an' water fills this whole room, just boilin' an' roarin', but that ain't all. Look up there!" He stepped back and pointed, and moving away from the rim, they looked up.

HIGH above them, in the vaulted top of the cave were several ragged holes. "Back in the trees, too! A man could walk right into them if he wasn't careful, an' he'd go right on through into that, or else break a leg an' lie on the rim until the water came."

"Ugly lookin'," Ross said. "Let's get out of here!"

They turned and started out, and then from behind them came a dull, mounting rumble!

"Run!" Burt's face was suddenly panic-stricken. "Here it comes!"

He lunged forward, and stumbling, fell full length on the steep trail. Haney stooped and grabbed the man, but he was a big man and powerful, and unless Bill Mabry had not grabbed the other arm he never would have gotten him up the steep hole in time.

They scrambled out into the sunlight, their faces pale, and below and behind them they heard the pound and rumble of boulders and the roar of water tumbling in the vast and empty cavern.

"That," Mabry said dryly, "is a good

place to keep out of!"

When they returned to the camp, Burt started for his horse. "I'll saddle up," he said, "an' help you hombres. I've been loafin' long enough."

"You stay here." Ross turned around and grinned at him. "You keep an eye on the Springs, as I've a hunch we'll have more visitors. This is a two-man job. Tomorrow, if we need help, you can go an' we'll leave Bill behind, or I'll stay."

Mabry had little to say on the ride into the lava beds, but Haney was just as pleased for his thoughts were busy with Sherry and the situation in the valley and at Soledad. He made up his mind he would take a chance and slip into town.

Then he could talk to Scott or Kinney, and would be able to find out just what was taking place.

He had no idea what had happened beyond the few words he could catch from the conversation of the posse searching for him, but Scott would know all that had happened. On second thought, it would be wiser to see only Scott, for the chances were that Kinney would be watched. Already, the connection with him would be formed in Star Levitt's mind.

THE work in the lava beds was hot and tiring. The wild cattle fought like devils and branding them was a slow task and a hazardous one for the two men.

Yet by nightfall they had branded enough of them to warrant their work. They camped that night in the canyon, and the following morning started the cattle out through the deep crevasse toward open range. Once they had them started toward Thousand Springs, they returned to the mesa where Rolly was waiting for them.

"Took a ride in last night," he volunteered, "been goin' stale layin' around. I talked to Kinney a little, but they are watchin' him."

"What's happened?" Haney's irritation at Burt's gamble was lost in his eagerness for news.

"Well, Levitt seems to be havin' everythin' his own way. He made Emmett Chubb sheriff, and says it's goin' to be necessary to be strict until they rid themselves of the 'lawless elements,' which probably means us.

"I talked to Scott, an' he sure wants to see you. Sherry Vernon ain't been seen in town since the fight, an' Bob only onct, an' then he came an' high-tailed it out of there. Levitt, he sent for outside law."

"He did *what?*"

"Sent for some outside law. He says he aims to have this Reynolds an' Pogue feud cleared up, an' he wants you caught. Says you're a rustler, an' may have had more than a little hand in the killin' at the stock pens. He wants the blame fixed, he says. Also, the story's around," Burt cleared his throat and avoided Haney's eyes, "that there will be a weddin' out at the VV pretty soon."

ROSS stared at the fire. So that was it? Now he would marry Sherry Vernon and the VV would be his in name as well as in appearances, for once they were married he would know how to handle Bob. If Haney was to do anything, it must be done soon. It must be done now.

"Howsoever, there seems to be some talk around. Syd Berdue ain't happy with the new setup. Kerb Dahl is foreman at the VV, an' Chubb is sheriff. Bob Streeter is foreman on the RR, an' they say Berdue fair raised mischief over that, but Levitt told him he would be taken care of."

"I reckon that's what he's scared of," Mabry said dryly. "I know what I'd do if Star Levitt said I was to be taken care of. I'd either get me a shot at Star or a fast horse out of the country."

"Well, Berdue ain't leavin'. Not willin', anyway. I reckon Star is anxious to have everything looking shipshape for the law when it comes up. They'll be glad to get shut of the trouble anyway, an if things look pretty, they'll leave them as they be."

Ross pondered the news. Certainly, Levitt's position was good. He was a smooth talking man with a good outward appearance, and if everything looked settled and calm, the outsiders would go away.

The valley would be safely in Levitt's hands, and Ross Haney would be declared an outlaw, and hunted by the forces of the law wherever he happened to appear.

It was, apparently, time to come off the mesa and enter the game once more.

Suddenly, he knew just exactly what he was going to do!

"Somethin' else," Burt added, "there's a lot of talk around about those steers of yours. Seems to be a lot of difference of view as to where they come from. No other brands on 'em, but full growed steers. There's a rumor around that you've had a herd in the hills for some time."

"Rolly," Ross said thoughtfully, "there's been some talk about another man on the VV spread. And when I was out there I saw a small cabin off across the wash. You know anything about that?"

"No, I don't know anything at all. There's somethin' mighty peculiar about that cabin, an' none of us ever went near it but Star or Kerb Dahl."

MABRY leaned back against a tree and built a smoke. "Dahl, he acted mighty skittish around that cabin, his own-self."

When morning came again to the Ruby Hills, Ross Haney mounted the appaloosa and started by a winding route toward Soledad. He had no intention of getting there before dark unless it could be managed without being seen.

After Soledad, he planned to go to the VV and bring Sherry away.

While he was about it, he would investigate that mysterious cabin, and learn once and for all if it had anything to do with Sherry and her attitude toward Levitt.

The trail he was using was the same used on the previous trips. A trail that lay along a concealed route through the timber, mountain and chaparral. It was the trail of which he had learned from the same source as provided the story of the cattle, the lava beds, and the mesa.

This might well be the last time he would travel it for he needed no additional warning to let him know that every man's hand would be against him in Soledad.

His own position in the valley was a good one, but must be backed by gun power, and he could not match Levitt as to numbers. However, Levitt himself was bringing the law in, and the law outweighed the brute force of any outlaw or the tricks of any criminal working beyond it.

CHAPTER XIV

Quick on the Draw

CIRCLING around Soledad he cut down through the chaparral to a position on the point of the ragged hills that overlooked the VV. Then, glass in hand, he took a comfortable position where he could watch all movement on the ranch and began a systematic survey of the entire area below.

The isolated cabin he located without trouble. He studied it for a long time, watching for any evidence of life, but found none. The cabin looked bare and lonely, and no smoke came from its small chimney, nor did anyone approach it. Obviously, the cabin held something or someone of great importance to Levitt or it would not be kept so secret.

After a careful survey of the ranch buildings, he decided the door of the cabin was not actually in view of the ranchhouse, for that view was cut off by the stable and several large stacks of hay for feeding saddle stock through the winter months.

Kerb Dahl was loitering around the ranch yard and he was wearing two guns, but no one else was in view. Once as dusk drew nearer, he saw Bob Vernon come to the door of the house and stare off toward town, but he turned then without coming outside, and walked back. But in that moment when he had stood in the door, Dahl had walked hastily forward and stood facing him, for all the world like a prison guard.

The evening faded and the stars came out. From away on the desert a soft wind picked up and began to blow gently. Back over the mountains lay a dark curtain of cloud, black and somber. As he glanced that way, Haney saw its bulging billows darting with sudden lightning, and once, like the whimper of far-off trumpets, he heard the distant sound of thunder.

He waited there, his ears attuned to every sound, his eyes roving over the ranch and all its approaches. In what he saw and heard now his life might de-

pend, for in a matter of minutes he was going down there. Yet aside from the restless roving of Kerb Dahl, there was no evidence of life about the ranch until a light came on. And when that light brightened the windows, Ross got to his feet, brushed the sand from his clothes and stretched.

Then, leading his horse, he came off the hill, concealed from the ranch by the point of the ridge on which he had waited. He took a winding route up a sandy wash toward the ranch, stopping from time to time to listen once more, then moving on. In the shadows back of the stable, he let the horse stand, reins trailing, with a light touch on the shoulder and a whisper of warning. Nothing now but Haney's own shrill whistle would move him from the spot.

Loosening his guns in their holsters, Ross Haney took a deep breath and turned his eyes on the lonely cabin. Then he went down into the gully and started for the cabin door.

Stark and alone on the knoll it stood, a gloomy little building that seemed somehow ominous and strange. Nearby, he crouched in the darkness listening for any sound of movement that might warn him of a possible occupant. Wind whispered around the eaves and from the ranchhouse itself there came a rattle of dishes, the sound made plain by that cool night air. Here at the cabin all was silence. The only window was covered with a fragment of sacking, so after a long minute, he moved to the door.

His heart pounded against his ribs, and his mouth felt dry. He paused, flattened against the building, and listened once more. Only the wind made a sound to be heard, a soft soughing that seemed to whisper of the impending rain. The clouds towered in the sky now, higher and closer, and the rumble of thunder was close, like a lonely lion, growling in his chest as he paced his cage.

Carefully, his hand went to the knob. In the darkness the metal seemed strangely chill. His right hand moved back to his gun butt, and then, ever so carefully, he turned the knob.

It was locked.

Gently he released the knob. The pause irritated him. He had built himself to a crisis that was frustration in this most obvious of ways, and the piling up of suspense made him reckless. A glance toward the ranch assured him he was unobserved, and probably could not be seen against the blackness along the cabin wall.

This was a puzzle he must solve, and now was the time. There might never be another. Behind this locked door might lie the answer to the mystery, and he moved forward suddenly, and placed his shoulder against the flimsy panel.

LIGHT streamed from the bunkhouse windows, too. From the ranch there came only the continuing rattle of dishes, and once a loud splash as someone threw water out onto the ground. Taking the knob in his hand he turned it, and then putting his shoulder to the door and digging his feet into the earth, he began to push.

The construction was flimsy enough. Evidently, whatever was kept here was guarded enough by Dahl or his partner. Haney relaxed, took a deep breath, and then putting his shoulder to the door again, he shoved hard, Something cracked sharply, and he drew back, hand on his gun, waiting and listening.

From within there came no sound. From the ranch, all was normal. He put his shoulder again to the door and heaved, but this time the damage had been done and the door came open so suddenly that he sprawled on hands and knees inside!

Catlike, he wheeled, back to the door and gun in hand. His eyes wide for the darkness, he stared about. The light wind caught the sacking with a ghostly hand and stirred it faintly. Lightning flashed, and the room lay bare before him for an instant.

A wooden chair on its side, a worn table with an empty basin, a cot covered with odorous blankets, and against the wall, several stacks of boxes.

Puzzled, Haney crossed to them. They were not heavy. He hesitated to risk the screech of a drawn nail, but by that time he was almost beyond caring. With his fingers, he got a grip on one of the boards that made up the box, and pulled hard. It held, and then as he strained, it came loose. If it made any sound it was lost in the convenient rumble of thunder.

Inside the box there was more sacking, and when that was parted, several

round cans, slightly larger and not unlike a snuff can. Lifting one to his nostrils, he sniffed curiously, and from the box came a strange, pungent, half forgotten odor.

"So that's it?" he said. Then he scowled into the darkness. It did not clarify the position of Sherry, nor her brother. And yet, his heart seemed to go empty within him—maybe it did!

Pocketing several of the boxes, he replaced the boards as well as he could and turned the box so as to conceal the more obvious damage. Then he slipped outside and pulled the door to behind him.

Confused by the unexpected turn of events he returned to his horse, whispered reassuringly, and then went around the stable toward the house.

Nearby was a window, and he moved up under the trees and looked through into what was the dining room of the ranch house. Three people sat at the table. Bob and Sherry Vernon, and at the head of the table, Star Levitt!

The window was slightly open, and he could hear their voices. Levitt was speaking: "Yes, I think that's the only solution, my dear." His tone was suave, cruel, but decisive. "We shall be married in this house on Monday. You understand?"

"You can't get away with this!" Bob burst out angrily, but the undercurrent of hopelessness in his voice was plain. "It's a devil of a thing! Sherry hates you! What sort of a mind can you have?"

"Sherry will change!" Levitt smiled across the table at her. "I promise you both, she will change. Also, it will be convenient for her to be my wife. She cannot testify against me, and I scarcely believe that with her as my wife you'll care to bring any charges, Bob. Also, I'll have control of this ranch, and as the others are in my hands, the situation is excellent."

"I've a good notion to—!" Bob's voice trailed off into sullenness.

"Have you?" Levitt glanced up, his eyes ugly. "Listen, Vernon! Don't give me any trouble! You're in this deeper than I am! You've got murder against you, as well as smuggling! If I'm ever exposed, you know that you and Sherry will both go down with me! What will your precious father think then, with his fine family pride and his bad heart?"

"Shut up!" Bob cried angrily. He leaped to his feet. "If it weren't for Dad, I'd kill you with my bare hands!"

"Really, Bob," Sherry said quietly, "perhaps we should talk this over. I'm not so sure that prison for both of us wouldn't be preferable to being married to Star!"

LEVITT'S face went white and dangerous. "You're flattering!" he said dryly, striving to retain his composure. "What, I might ask, would have happened to Bob if I hadn't gotten him away from that mess and brought him here? The killing of Clyde Aubury was not any ordinary killing."

Aubury? Ross Haney's brows drew together, and he strained his ears to hear more.

"Yes, I think I should have earned your gratitude," Levitt continued. "Instead, I find you falling for that drifting cowhand."

Sherry Vernon's eyes lifted from her plate. "Star," she said coolly, "you could never understand through that vast ego of yours that Ross Haney is several times the man you could ever have been, even if you hadn't become a thief and a blackmailer of women."

Haney's heart leaped, and his lips tightened. In that instant, he would cheerfully have gone through the window, glass and all, and cheerfully given his life if it would have helped. Yet even in his elation at her praise of him, he could not but admire the coolness and composure. Her manner was quiet, poised. He stared into the window, his heart pounding. Then she lifted her eyes and looked straight into his!

For an instant that seemed an eternity, their eyes held. In hers he saw hope leap into being, then saw her eyes suddenly masked, and she turned her head, passing something to her brother with an idle comment that ignored Levitt completely.

"Well," she said after a minute, her voice sounding just a tone louder, "everything is all right for the time. At least I have until Monday!"

He drew back. That message was for him, and between now and Monday was a lifetime—three whole days!

Three days in which many things might be done, in which she might be taken from here—in which he might even kill Star Levitt.

For he knew now that was what he would do if the worst came to the worst. He had never yet actually hunted a man down for the purpose of killing him, but he knew that was just what he would do if there was no other way out.

Tiptoeing to the corner of the house, Ross started for the stable and his horse, and then as he stepped past the last tree, a huge cottonwood, a man stepped out. "Say, you got a match?"

It was Kerb Dahl!

Recognition came to them at the same instant, and the man let out a startled yelp and grabbed for his gun.

There was no time to grapple with the man, no chance for a quick, soundless battle. Too much space intervened so there was only once chance. Even as Dahl's hand grasped his gun, Haney plucked out his own gun and fired!

Flame stabbed from the muzzle, and then a second stab of fire. Dahl took a hesitant step forward, his gun half out. Then the gun belched flame, shooting a hole through the bottom of the holster and Dahl toppled forward on his face.

Behind Dahl the bunkhouse door burst open, and there was a shout from ranchhouse itself. As quickly Ross ducked around the stable and hit the saddle running.

The palouse knew an emergency when he felt one and he lit out, running like a scared rabbit. A gun barked, then another, but nothing in that part of the country could catch the palouse when he started going places in a hurry, and that was just what he was doing.

On the outskirts of Soledad, with the pounding hoofs of the pursuit far behind Haney leaped the horse over a gully and took to the desert, weaving a pattern of tangled tracks into a trail where cattle had been driven, then cutting back into the scattered back alleys of Soledad, leaving town a few minutes later, crossing a shale slide and swinging around a butte to hit his old trail for Thousand Springs Mesa.

"Rio, you saved my neck tonight, an' we took a scalp. I'd as soon never take another, but if we have to, let 'em all be hombres like Dahl!"

Yet what was all this about a murder charge against Bob Vernon? And what was their connection with the smuggling and the cans of opium he had found in the cabin? He had known the smell the instant he lifted the can to his nostrils, for it is a smell one does not soon forget. He remembered it from a visit, a few years before, to some of the dives along the Barbary Coast.

And now he must think. Somehow, some way, he must free Sherry from this entanglement, and as a last resort, he would do it, if he must, by facing Star Levitt with a gun!

CHAPTER XV

Captured

HANEY'S course was clear. Whatever other plans he might have had must be shelved and the whole situation brought into the open by Monday. Studying the situation carefully, he could see little hope, unless the sheriff and the investigating officers from the outside arrived on Monday. Then, if he could present his case — but Levitt would take every measure to avoid that and his only chance would be to get into town before time.

On Sunday night, in absolute blackness, the three rode down the back trail toward Soledad. Outside of town they slackened pace. Ross turned in his saddle as Burt and Mabry came up beside him.

He gestured toward the town. "It looks quiet enough. You two leave your horses at May's. Put them in the stable, and I'll leave mine there, too. Then you two either hide out in the stable, or get down to the hotel and see Kinney. I'm going direct to Scott, and he'll see Allan for me.

"If the worst comes to the worst, and there is no other way, I'm going gunning for Star. I'd rather die myself than see that girl forced to marry him, or to see him win after all this murder and deceit.

"However, I may give myself up when the sheriff gets here."

Mabry nodded thoughtfully. "Who are these hombres Levitt's bringin' in, Ross? Are they really the law?"

"Yeah, you see he calls Chubb the sheriff; actually he's only a town mar-

shal. The county seat is over a hundred miles away by trail, an' there's no deputy up here. Star Levitt is shrewd. He knows that sooner or later some word of this scrap will get out. Somebody, on a stage or somewhere, will talk. The chances are they already have.

"Well, so he sends to the governor for an investigating officer, wanting the whole thing cleared up. That puts him on the map as a responsible citizen. He'll do the talking and the men he selects will back him up, and the whole situation will be smoothed over. The chances are one of his men will be made a deputy sheriff.

"Then the investigatin' officers will go back to the capital and Levitt's in a nice spot. If any trouble comes up, they will always remember him, apparently rich, a stable citizen, a man who called on the law. They wouldn't believe a thing against him. His skirts will be clear, an' we three will be outlawed.

"Somehow, we've got to block that an' expose the true state of affairs."

"What is this joker you said you had?" Mabry asked.

"Wait. That will do for the showdown. Nobody knows about that but myself an' Scott. We'll have this whole show well sewed up."

He was the first to move forward, walking the palouse through the encircling trees to May Ashton's cabin on the edge of Soledad. There was no one in sight, but a light glowed in the cabin. He moved up and led his horse into the stable and left it there. Then he slipped along the wall of the house until he could glance into a window. The waitress was inside, and alone.

She opened the door at his tap, and he slipped inside. "You!" she gasped. "We were wondering how to get word to you! Star Levitt is marrying Sherry tomorrow!"

"I know. What about the officers from the capital?"

"They'll be in tomorrow, too. In the morning. The sheriff is coming up from the county seat, and some attorney from the capital named Ward Clymer. Two state Rangers are coming with them. I've heard it all discussed in the restaurant."

"They will have a hearing? Where?"

"In the lobby of the hotel. It's the only place large enough, aside from the Bit and Bridle. I heard Voyle talking with Syd Berdue about it. Incidentally," she added quickly, "there's a warrant out for your arrest. Emmett Chubb has it. They want you for killing Kerb Dahl. Was that you?"

"Uh-huh, but it was a fair shake. In fact, he went for his gun first. I had no choice but to shoot."

"Well, the order is out to shoot on sight, and they have reward posters ready to go out tomorrow morning. They will be all over town for the officers to see when they come in. You're wanted for murder, dead or alive and they are offering a thousand dollars."

ROSS smiled wryly. "That will make it worse! A thousand dollars is money enough to start the blood hunters out.

"Now listen: I'm going to Scott, and I'm going now. Mabry and Burt will be in soon, and they'll hide either here or close to here. They will be standing by in case of emergency, I'll try to communicate with you in case of really serious trouble, and then you can get word to them. If the worst comes to the worst, I'll give myself up to the state officials and make them hold a preliminary hearing right here. I can talk them into that, I think. Then we can get facts in front of them."

"Ross, don't plan on anybody siding you," May said quickly. "Chubb has been around town with Hanson, and they have frightened everybody. You can't depend on a soul. I don't even know whether I'd have nerve enough to back you up, but I'm afraid Allan will. He's that kind."

The street was dark when Ross Haney stepped out of May's cabin. He did not try to keep out of sight, realizing that such an attempt, if seen, would be even more suspicious. He walked rapidly down the street, staying in the deep shadows, but walking briskly along. Old Man Scott was the man he must see. He must get to him at once, and he would know what to do. Also, it would be a place to hide.

Glancing across the street, he saw a half dozen horses standing at the hitch rail in front of the Bit and Bridle. There was light flooding from the windows, and the sound of loud laughter from within.

A man opened the door and stum-

bled drunkenly into the street, and for a moment, Ross hesitated, feeling uneasy. The street was altogether too quiet, there was too little movement. He turned at right angles and went between a couple of buildings, starting for the back door of Scott's place. Once he thought he glimpsed a movement in the shadows, and hesitated, but after watching and seeing nothing more, he went on up to the back door and tapped gently. The door opened, and he stepped in.

Scott glanced at him, and alarm sprang into his eyes.

"Set down!" he said. "Set down! You've sure been stirrin' up a pile of trouble, Haney!"

He poured a cup of coffee and placed it on the table. "Drink that," he said quietly. "It will do you good."

Scott stared at him as he lifted the cup. "Big trouble's goin' to break loose, Scott," Haney said. "I hope I can handle it."

His ears caught a subtle whisper of movement outside, and his eyes lifted and then his face went to a dead, sickly white.

Old Man Scott had a shotgun, and its twin barrels were pointed right at his stomach.

"Sit tight, son," he said sternly. "A move an' I'll cut you in two!"

He lifted his voice. "All right, out there! Come on in! I've got him!"

The door burst open and Emmett Chubb sprang into the room, and with him was Voyle, Tolman and Allan Kinney!

Chubb's eyes gleamed and his pistol lifted. "Well, Mr. Ross Haney, who's top dog now?"

"Hold it!" Scott's shotgun made a sharp movement. "You take her easy, Emmett Chubb! This man's my prisoner. I'm claimin' the reward, right now. Moreover, I'm holdin' him alive for Levitt!"

"You will not!" Chubb snarled. "I'll kill the dirty dog!"

"Not unless you want a blast from this shotgun!" Scott snapped. The old outlaw's blue eyes sparked. "Nobody's beatin' me out of my money! Kinney here, he has a finger in it, maybe, because he tipped me off, but you take him away from me over my dead body!"

Baffled, Chubb stared from one to the other. "He's right, Emmett," Kinney agreed. "He got him first."

Ross Haney stood flatfooted, staring from Kinney to Scott. "Sold out!" he sneered. "I might have suspected it!"

Kinney flushed, but Scott shrugged. "A thousand dollars is a lot of money, boy. I've seen men killed for a sight less."

"Let's take him off to jail then," Chubb said. "This ain't no place for him!"

"He stays right here!" Scott said harshly. "He's my prisoner until Levitt gets him, an' then Levitt can do what he's a might to. Nobody's beatin' me out of that money! Stay here an' help guard if you want, but don't you forget for one minute that he's my prisoner! This shotgun won't forget it!"

KINNEY slipped around behind Haney and lifted his guns. Reluctantly, Haney backed into a corner and was tied to a chair. Shocked by the sudden betrayal, he could only stare from Allan to Scott, appalled by the sudden turn of fortune.

From the high, if desperate hopes of the day, he was suddenly smashed back into hopelessness, a prisoner, betrayed by the men he had most confidence in. How could they have known he was in town? There was only one way. May must have betrayed him! She and Allan must have planned together, and when he left her house, she must have gotten word to him at once.

Chubb dropped into a chair and pulled one of his guns over into his lap. "I'd like to blast his heart out," he said sullenly. "What you frettin' so about, Scott? You get the money, dead or alive?"

"Sure!" Scott said. "And if you kill him you'll lay claim to it. I wouldn't trust you across the street where that much money was concerned! Nor any of you!"

He chuckled, his eyes sneering at Haney. "Anyway, Levitt's top dog around here from now on, an' he's the boy I do business with! I'm too old to be shoved out in the cold at my time of life! I ain't figurin' on it! I'll work with Star, an' he'll work with me!"

"I never heard of you bein' so thick with him!" Chubb's irritation was obvious.

Scott chuckled. "Who got him into this country, do you suppose? I've

knowed him for years! Who told him this place was right for a smart man? I did! That's who!

"Haney here, he figured on the same thing. He figured on takin' over when Reynolds an' Pogue were out of it, but he was leavin' too much to chance. Star doesn't leave anything to chance."

Bitterly, Ross Haney stared at the floor. This time he was finished. If Mabry and Burt had gone to May's they would have been sold out, too. He listened, straining his ears for shots, hoping at least one of them would manage to fight it out and go down with a gun in his hand.

The situation was all Levitt's now. The man was a front rider, and these others were with him. He stared at Kinney, and the young man's eyes wavered and looked away. How could he have guessed that such a man would sell him out? And Scott? Of course, the old man was an admitted outlaw, or had been. Still, he had felt very close to the old man, and liked him very much.

THERE was no chance for Sherry now—unless . . . His eyes narrowed with thought.

What would they do with him? Would they get word to Star that he was a prisoner, then smuggle him out of town to be killed? Or would they bring him out in the open with evidence arrayed against him, or kill him "trying to escape"?

If only there would be some break, some chance to talk to Ward Clymer or the sheriff! Of course, held as a prisoner, with reward posters out and stories Star and his men would tell, he would have himself in a bad position even before they talked to him, for they would be prejudiced against him, and everything he might say. And what evidence had he? Star Levitt would have plenty, and as May had told him, no one in town would testify for him against Star.

They were frightened, or they were getting on the band wagon.

He was through.

Unless—there was a vague hope—that Mabry and Burt had not come in. If they could somehow free him? Knowing the manner of men they were, he knew they would not hesitate to make the attempt.

CHAPTER XVI

Back to the Wall

IN THE back room of the store the night slid slowly by and crawled into the gray of day, slowly, reluctantly. The rising sun found the sky overcast and no opening in the clouds through which it could shine down on the clustered false fronted frame buildings and adobes of Soledad. A lone Mexican, a burro piled twice its own height with sticks, wandered sleepily down the town's dusty street.

Pat walked out of the Bit and Bridle and stared at the sky, then turned and walked back within. A pump rattled somewhere, then began a rhythmical speaking.

Half asleep in his bonds, Ross Haney heard the water gushing into the pail in spouts of sound. He stirred restlessly, and his chair creaked. He opened his eyes to see four pairs of eyes leveled at him. Emmett Chubb, Voyle, Allan Kinney and Scott all sat ready and watchful. His lids fluttered and closed. Behind them his mind began to plan, to contrive.

No man is so desperate as a prisoner. No man so ready to plan, to try to think his way out. If only his hands were free! In a few minutes, an hour at most, the stage would rattle down the street and halt in front of the Cattleman's Rest and the passengers would go into the Cafe to eat. Later they might go upstairs to sleep. During that interval, he would know his fate. He touched a tongue to dry lips.

"Al," Scott said suddenly, "you take this here shotgun. I'll throw together a few ham an' eggs. I'm hungry as a hibernatin' bear in the springtime!"

Tolman, who had left earlier, returned now and stuck his head in the door. "Stage a comin'!" he said. "An' Syd Berdue just blowed in!"

"That VV bunch in yet?" Chubb asked, without turning his head. "When Dolph Turner gets in, you tell him about this. He'll see that Levitt knows first of all!"

Scott was working around the room

and soon it was filled with the pleasant breakfast smell of frying ham and eggs and the smell of coffee. Despite his worry, Haney realized he had been hungry, and for the first time recalled he had eaten nothing the night before.

Emmett Chubb got up. He was a stocky, swarthy man with a square jaw and a stubble of beard. His hair was unkempt, and when he crossed the room to splash water on his face and hands Ross noted the worn guns had notches carved in them, three on one gun, five on the other. Eight men.

"The only thing I'm sorry for," Chubb said as he dried his hands, his eyes on Haney, "is that I didn't get the chance to shoot it out with you in the street!"

His black eyes were sneering and cold. "I'd like to put you in the dust," he said, "I'd like to see you die!"

"Well," Haney said dryly, "my hands are tied, so you're safe enough to try.

"You're a lot of yellow backed double-crossers. You, Chubb, are a cheap murderer. You blew town fast enough after killin' Vin Carter or you'd have had a chance to draw on me—or run."

Chubb walked across the room and stopped, his feet apart, in front of Haney. Lifting his open palm, he slapped Ross three times across the mouth. Scott did not turn, and Kinney shuffled his feet on the floor.

"Maybe Levitt will give me the job," he said harshly, "I hope he does!"

The door opened suddenly and three men stood there. Ross Haney's head jerked up as he saw Levitt. Star Levitt glanced from Chubb to Scott, and then indicated the men with him.

"Neal an' Baker, of the Rangers. They want the prisoner!"

Chubb stared, disappointment and resentment struggling for place in his yes. "Here he is! Scott's been holdin' him."

Neal bent over Haney and cut the ropes that tied his arms. "You come with us. We're havin' the hearin' right now."

HANEY turned and as he started toward the door, he saw Scott smiling. The old outlaw looked right into his eyes and winked, deliberately.

What did that mean? Scowling, Haney walked across the street toward the hotel. Neal glanced at him a couple of times. "You know a man named Mabry?"

"Bill Mabry?" Ross turned to Neal, astonished. "Why, sure. He works for me, an' a mighty good man!"

"When Clymer asks you questions," Neal said, "give him the information you have straight, honest, and without prejudice."

Puzzled by the suggestion, Ross Haney walked into the room, and was shown to a chair.

A big man with a capable, shrewd looking face glanced at him sharply, then went back to examining some documents on the table. Several other men trooped in, and then Sherry and Bob Vernon walked into the room. More and more astonished, Ross stared from one to the other, trying to see what must have happened.

He had never believed that Levitt would allow Clymer to confront the Vernons, nor himself, if it could be avoided. Yet here they all were, and it looked like a showdown. Allan Kinney was there, and May. The pretty waitress glanced at him, and he averted his eyes. Scott had come over, and Star Levitt was one of the last to come into the room.

From the dark expression on Levitt's face, he decided all could not be going well for the big man, and the thought cheered him. Anything that was bad news for Levitt was sure to be good news for him.

Ward Clymer sat back in his chair and looked over the room, his eyes noncommittal. "Now, friends," he said briskly, "this is an entirely informal hearing to try to clarify the events leading up to the battle between the Reynolds and Pogue factions and to ascertain the guilt, if any of those who are here with us.

"Also," he glanced at Haney, "I am informed that Ross Haney, the cattleman, is held on a charge of murder for the slaying of one Kerb Dahl, a cowhand from the VV. If such is the truth, and if the evidence warrants it, Ross Haney will be taken south to the county seat for trial. In the meantime, let us examine the evidence."

"Mr. Levitt, will you tell us the events that preceded the fight between Reynolds and Pogue?"

Star Levitt got to his feet, very

smooth, very polished. He glanced around, smiled a little, and began. "It seems that before I arrived in the Ruby Hills country there had been considerable trouble over water and range rights, with sporadic fighting, between the two big outfits. The VV, owned by the Vernons, was not involved in this feud, although there seemed to be some desire on the part of both outfits to possess the VV holdings and water. On the day the fight started there was some minor altercation over branding, and it led to a shooting which quickly spread until most of the hands on both sides were involved, with resulting deaths."

"What was your part in the fight?" Clymer asked shrewdly.

"None at all, sir. I saw trouble coming and withdrew my men and got out of the way myself. After it was over, we did what we could for the wounded."

"There are no witnesses present from the other outfits?"

"Oh, yes! Emmett Chubb, now the town marshal, survived the fight. Also Voyle, of the Box N, is here. Kerb Dahl, of the VV, who was in the middle of things was later murdered by the prisoner, Ross Haney."

"Sir?" Haney asked suddenly.

Clymer's eyes shifted to him, hesitated, and then asked, "Did you have a question?"

"Yes, I'd like to ask Star Levitt where his range holdings were."

"I don't see that the question has any bearing on the matter," Levitt replied coolly.

"It's a fair question," Clymer admitted. "It may have some later bearing on it. I understand you were running cattle. Where was your headquarters?"

Levitt hesitated. "On the VV," he said. "You see I am soon to marry Miss Vernon."

Clymer glanced curiously at Haney. "Does that answer your question?"

"Sure, it answers it for now. Only I want it plain to everybody that Star Levitt had no holdings on the range other than cattle and the use of the VV headquarters."

LEVITT stared at Haney, and shrugged in a bored manner. The attorney then asked Chubb and Voyle a few questions about the killing, and through Scott, Pat, the bartender, and others brought out the facts of the long standing feud between the Reynolds and Pogue outfits. Every story served to bolster Levitt's position. Bob Vernon offered his evidence in short, clipped sentences, and then Sherry hers.

As she started to return to her chair, Haney spoke up. "Another question: Sherry, did anyone warn you away from the roundup, telling you to leave at once, that there might be trouble?"

She hesitated. "Why, yes. Star Levitt did."

"I could see some of the men were spoiling for a fight," Star said quietly. "It seemed a bad place for a woman, due to the impending trouble and the profanity attending the work of the men."

"May I ask a few questions?" Ross asked.

"Mr. Clymer," Levitt interrupted, "this man Haney is a trouble-maker! His questions can do no good except to try to incriminate others and to put himself in a better light. The man is a murderer!"

Clymer shrugged. "We're here to ascertain the facts. However, the prisoner should be examined in connection with the killing of Kerb Dahl. What have you to say to that, Haney?"

"That it is impossible to divide the killing of Dahl from the other sides of the case. Nor is it going to be of any use to talk of it until the events leading up to that point are made plain."

"Well, that's reasonable enough," Clymer said. "Go ahead."

Levitt's lips tightened and his nostrils flared. Voyle had walked into the back of the room with Syd Berdue, and they stood there, surveying the crowd. With them was the silent man who had been Dahl's partner.

"I want to ask Levitt how many hands he had when he came into this country," Ross said evenly.

Star was puzzled and wary. "Why, not many. What difference does it make?"

"How many? You used the VV spread, how many hands did *you* have?"

"Why, one was actually that came with me." The question puzzled Levitt and disturbed him. He couldn't see where it pointed.

"The one man was that short, dark man at the back of the room, wasn't

it? The man called Turner?"

"That's right."

Haney turned suddenly in his chair and fired the question at Dahl's partner. "Turner, what's a piggin string?"

"What?" The man looked puzzled and frightened. The question startled him, and he was irritated at being suddenly noticed.

"I asked what a piggin string was. I'd also like to know what a *grulla* is."

Turner turned his head from side to side, eager for a way out, but there was none. He wet his lips with his tongue, and swallowed.

"I don't know," he said.

"These questions make no sense at all!" Levitt said irritably. "Let's get on with the murder hearing!"

"They make sense to me," Ross replied. Then turning to Clymer, he added, "You, sir, were raised on a cow ranch, so you know that a piggin string is a short piece of rope used to tie a critter when its throwed—thrown. You also know that a *grulla* is a mouse color, a sort of gray, an' usually applied to horses.

"The point I'm gettin' at is that Levitt came into this country with one man who wasn't a cowhand. Turner doesn't know the first thing about a ranch or about cattle."

"What's that got to do with it?" Levitt demanded.

Clymer was looking at Ross Haney thoughtfully. He began to smile as he anticipated the reply.

"Why, just this, Levitt. How many cattle did you bring into this country?" Haney demanded sharply. He leaned forward. "An' how many have you got now?"

SOMEBODY out in the room grunted and Scott was grinning from ear to ear. The question had caught Levitt flat-footed. Clymer turned on him, his eyes bright with interest. "A good question, Mr. Levitt. On the way here you told me you ran a thousand head. Where did you get them?"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" Levitt shouted angrily. For the first time he was out in the open, and Ross Haney had led him there, led him by the nose into a trap. As Haney knew, when pushed, Levitt grew angry, and it was that he was playing for.

"Mr. Clymer," Ross interrupted, "I think it has a lot to do with it! This man, claimin' to be a representative rancher, admits comin' into this country with one man who wasn't a cowhand even if he may be fairly good with a gun. No two men like that are bringin' a thousand head of cattle into this country an' brandin' 'em.

"But I'll show you that Levitt does have a thousand head, or near to it, an' every one with a worked-over brand!"

"That's a lie!" Levitt shouted, leaping to his feet.

Ross settled back in his chair, smiling. "Now ask me about the killin' of Kerb Dahl," he said gently.

Star Levitt sagged back in his chair, flushed and angry. He had let go of his temper. Despite his burning rage, he knew he was in an ugly position where Haney, by his fool questions, had led him. The killing led away from the cattle, so he jumped at the chance.

Before he could speak, Clymer asked Haney. "If he has the branded cattle now, who branded them?"

"Kerb Dahl, the man I killed on the VV, Voyle of the Box N, Tolman, who hired on after Levitt got here, an' Emmett Chubb, among others."

"That's absurd!" Levitt said contemptuously.

"Sherry, name the men you heard talking at Thousand Springs!" Ross asked quickly.

The sudden question startled her and before Levitt could catch her eye, she glanced up and replied, "Why, Dahl was there, and Voyle, Tolman and Sydney Berdue."

"What did they talk about?"

Levitt was leaning forward in his chair, his eyes upon her. Sherry glanced at him, and her eyes wavered. "Why, I—" Her voice trailed off.

"Before you answer," Ross told her, "let me tell you that you've been the victims, you and your brother, of the foulest trick ever played."

Haney turned to Clymer: "Sir, Miss Vernon was concealed near the Springs and overheard some of the plotting between the men mentioned. These were the same men who altered the brands for Levitt. Through them Levitt engineered and planned the whole fight, forcing an issue between Reynolds and Pogue deliberately, and in the battle, killing the two men who opposed him in the Ruby Hills country. It will no

doubt strike you that among the survivors of that battle were *all* the men seen by Miss Vernon at the Springs.

"Also," he added, "Levitt was blackmailing the Vernons, using their ranch as a storage depot and transfer point for his deals in the opium trade!"

CHAPTER XVII

Desperate Chance

KNOCKED off balance by these public revelations, Star Levitt struggled to his feet, his face ashen. The carefully planned coup was tumbling about his ears, and he who had come into the valley as a leader in a dope ring, and planned to become the legitimate owner of a great ranch, suddenly saw the whole thing reduced to chaos.

"Furthermore," Ross got to his feet, and the ringing sound of his voice reduced to silence the stir in the room, "I think this is the proper time to make a few points clear." Opening his shirt, he drew a leather wallet from inside it and from the wallet drew a handful of papers which he passed to Clymer. "Will you tell Mr. Levitt," he said, "what you have there?"

Clymer glanced at them, then looked up in amazement. "Why, these are deeds!" he exclaimed, glancing from Haney to Levitt. "These indicate that you are the owner of both Hitson Springs and the Bullhorn ranch headquarters, including the water right. Also, here are papers that show Haney has filed on the Thousand Springs area!"

"What?" Star Levitt's fingers gripped the arms of his chair and his brow creased. Before his eyes came the whole plan he had made, all his planning, his actions—all were rendered perfectly futile. Who controlled the water in those three sources controlled the Ruby Hills, and there was no way of circumventing it. From the beginning he had been beaten, and now he had been made ridiculous.

"I told you," Haney said quietly, looking at Levitt, "that you had overlooked the obvious. Somehow a crook always does.

"Now, sir," Ross said to Clymer, "With the cattle brands I can show you, the evidence we can produce, I'd say that you have a strong case for robbery and murder against Star Levitt!"

There was a slight stir in the back of the room, and Haney's eyes shifted. Emmett Chubb was slipping from the room to the street.

As the accusation rang in the silent room, Star Levitt held himself taut. The crashing of his plans meant less to him now than the fact that he had been shown up for a fool by the cowhand he despised and hated. Suddenly, the rage that was building within him burst into a fury that was almost madness. His face went white, his eyes glassy and staring, and letting out a choking cry, he sprang for Haney.

Warned by Sherry's scream, Ross jerked his eyes back from the vanishing Chubb and lunged from his chair swinging two brain jarring blows to the head. They rocked Levitt, but nothing could stop his insane rush, and Haney gave ground before the onslaught. Levitt swung wildly with both hands, beside himself with hate and fury.

But Ross lunged at him, burying a right in the bigger man's stomach, then hooking a powerful, jarring left to the chin. Levitt staggered and Ross, eager for battle, bulled into him, bringing his head down on Levitt's shoulder and smashing away with both hands in a wicked body attack. He threw the punches with all the power built into his shoulders by years of bulldogging steers and hard range work.

He caught Levitt with a wicked overhand right, and battered him back into the chairs. The crowd scattered. From somewhere outside Ross heard the sharp rap of a shot, and then another. Then quiet. His right smashed Levitt over a chair, and the big man came up with a lunge, grabbing for the chair itself.

Ross rushed him and Star tried to straighten, but Haney clubbed him with a fist on the kidney and the big man went to his knees. Ross stepped back, panting. "Get up!" Ross said. "Get up an' take it!"

Levitt lunged to his feet and Ross smashed his lips with a sweeping left.

He ripped a gash in Levitt's cheek with a right. Star tottered back, his eyes glazed. He straightened then, shook his head, some measure of cunning returning to him. Suddenly he turned and hurled himself through the glass of the window!

Ross sprang to the window after him, and caught a fleeting glimpse of Emmett Chubb as a bullet whirred within a hair of his cheek and buried itself in the window frame.

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs, then silence.

Haney's hands fell helplessly. Scott moved up beside him, handing him his guns. "Sorry I couldn't get 'em to you sooner," he said, "but you did plenty without 'em!"

GLYMER caught his arm. "You've loyal friends, Haney. Burt and Mabry stopped the stage outside of town. Levitt had ridden on ahead, and they took time to tell me a lot of things, and asked that I get you and the Vernons together with Levitt and withhold judgment until you had talked and I had listened.

"As it happens," he added, "Neal and I had both been reared on ranches where Mabry worked. We knew him for a good man, and an honest one. From the first we had doubts that all Levitt had told us was the truth. Mabry also had a cowhide with him, and any Western man could see the brand had been altered from a VV to Three Diamonds."

Ross shoved his guns into his holsters and pushed his way to Sherry who was standing white and still near the door, waiting for him. He said gently: "Sherry, we can talk about it some other time, but I think I can make a rough guess at most of it. Why don't you go in and get some coffee? I'll join you in a minute."

Mabry and Burt were waiting outside, and they had the palouse. "We can chase 'em, boss," Rolly said, "but they've got quite a start."

"Later. I heard some shooting. What was it."

"That *was* Voyle," Mabry said grimly. "He made a rush for his horse an' met Rolly halfway. He made a grab for his gun an' I guess he wasn't as gun slick as he figured."

"Tolman?"

"Roped an' hogtied. He'll go south with the Rangers an', unless I miss my guess, he'll talk all the way. We've got Turner, too."

"Incidentally," Mabry added, "don't you jump to no conclusions about Kinney an' Scott. I ain't had much time to talk to Scott, but we moved down to May's like you said, an' all three of us seen you follered to Scott's by some of Levitt's crowd.

"They had us way outnumbered, an' Kinney came up and said if he butted in he might keep you from gettin' killed."

"That was my idea," Scott put in. "I thought I seen somethin' in the shadows when I let you in, an' then I heard a step outside, an' I knowed I either had to get you as my prisoner or we'd both be in a trap. Chubb would kill you sure as shootin' if he got a chance, but as my prisoner I'd have the right to interfere."

"So, then Levitt, Chubb an' Berdue are the only ones who got away?" Ross mused.

"Uh-huh," Mabry agreed, and then running his fingers through his coarse red hair, he commented: "That ain't good! I know that sort, an' you can take my word for it, they'll be back!"

Yet as the days found their way down the year and the summer faded toward autumn, there was no further sign of the three missing men. The mornings became chill, but the sun still lay bright and golden upon the long valley, and the view from the growing house upon the mesa top changed from green to green and gold shot through with streaks of russet and deep red. The aspen leaves began to change and sometimes in the early morning the countryside was white with the touch of frost.

Rumors came occasionally to their ears. There had been a bank held up at Weaver, a stage had been looted and two men killed at Canyon Pass, and one of the three bandits had been recognized by a passenger as Emmett Chubb. Then the town marshal in Pie Town was shot down when he attempted to question a big, handsome man with a beard.

When Sherry rode the valley or over into the Ruby Hills Ross Haney was constantly at her side, and the appaloosa and Flame became constant companions. Despite the fact that no reports came of any of the three men

being seen nearby, Haney was worried.

"Ross," Sherry said suddenly, "you've promised to take me to the crater in the lava beds. Why not today?"

He hesitated uneasily. "That place has me buffaloed!" he said after awhile. "I never go into it myself without wishing I was safely out. The way those big rocks hang over the trail scares a man. If they ever fell while we were in there, we'd never get out, never in this world!"

She smiled. "At least we'd be together!"

HE grinned and shoved his hat back with a quick, familiar gesture. His eyes twinkled. "That sure would be something, but I'd not like to have you confined in that place all your life. You might get tired of me. This way you can see a few folks once in awhile an' maybe I'll wear better."

"But you've been there so many times, Ross, and Rolly tells me it's perfectly beautiful. I want to see the ice caves, too!"

Below them there was a faint rumbling and stirring within the mountain and they exchanged a glance. "I'm getting used to it now," he admitted, "but when I first heard it that rumbling gave me the chills. When we move into the house we'll have those holes fenced off. They are really dangerous."

"I know. Ever since you took me down there and showed me that awful hole I've been frightened of it. Suppose someone was trapped down there, with a foot caught, or something? It would be frightful!"

"It would be the end!" Ross replied grimly. "When that geyser shoots up there it brings rocks with it that weigh fifty or sixty pounds, and they rattle around in that cave like seeds in a gourd. You wouldn't have to have a foot caught, either. All you would have to do would be to get far enough away from the mouth of that cave so you couldn't make it in a few steps. A man wouldn't have a chance!"

They were riding down the mesa through the slender aspens, their graceful white trunks like slender albaster columns. The trail was carpeted with the scarlet and gold of autumn leaves.

"Somehow it all seems like some dreadful dream!" she said suddenly. "We'd been so happy, Bob and I. It was fun on the ranch, working with the men, building our own place, learning all the new things about the West. Bob loved handling the horses and working with cattle, and then when we were happiest, Star Levitt came out to the ranch.

"You can't imagine what a shock it was to us, for we thought all that had been left behind and forgotten. Our brother, the oldest one in the family, had gone down to Mexico and got mixed up with a girl down there, and started using dope. He'd always been Father's favorite, and we all loved him, but Ralph was always weak and easily led. Levitt got hold of him, and used his name for a front to peddle dope in the States.

"Father has been ill for a long time with a heart condition that became steadily worse. He had just two great prides, two things to live for. One was his family reputation and the other was his children. Principally, that meant Ralph.

"We knew about it, but we kept it from Dad, and later when Ralph was killed down there, we managed to keep the whole truth of the story from him. We knew the shock and the disgrace would kill him, and if by some chance he lived, he would feel the shame and the disgrace so much that his last years would be nothing but sorrow.

"Star told us that he needed our ranch. It was the proper working base for him, not too far from Mexico, yet in easy reach of a number of cities. He said he wanted to use the ranch for a headquarters for two months, and then he would leave. If we did not consent, he threatened to expose the whole disgraceful affair and see that my father heard it all.

"We were foolish, of course, but it is so hard to know what to do. And Levitt didn't give us time; he just started moving in. The next thing we knew he had his own men on the ranch and we were almost helpless. Reynolds and Pogue were outlaws or as bad, and we could not turn to them. There was nobody, until you came."

Ross nodded grimly. "Don't I know it? When I started digging into the background of this country I found less good people here than anywhere I ever knew. And the best folks were all little people."

"It was after he had been here a few weeks," Sherry continued, "that he decided to stay. He was shrewd enough to know he couldn't keep on like that forever, and here was a good chance to have power, wealth, and an honest income. He saw the fighting between the Box N and RR was his chance."

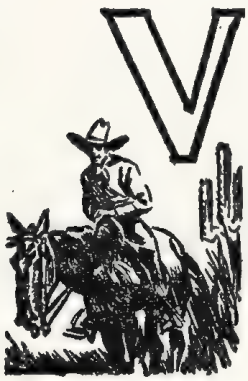
The two rode on in silence, their horses' hoofs making little sound on the leaf covered trail. Suddenly, before Ross realized how they were riding, they were at the entrance to the lava bed trail.

Sherry laughed mischieviously. "All right, now! As long as we're here, why don't we go in? We can be back before dark, you told me so yourself!"

He shrugged. "All right, have it your way."

CHAPTER XVIII

Thirst for Vengeance



VERY reluctantly the appaloosa turned into the trail between the great black rolls of lava, he led the way into the narrow trail. Once started there was no turning back, for until a rider was well within the great cleft itself there was insufficient room for any turning of the horses.

When they reached the deepest part of the crevasse, where in some bygone age an earthquake or volcanic eruption had split the rim of the crater deep into the bed rock, Ross pointed out the great crags suspended over the trail.

"This place will be inaccessible someday," he told her. "There will be an earthquake or some kind of a jar, and those rocks will fill the cleft so there will be no trail or place for one.

"From the look of them a man might get them started with a bar or lever of some kind. I never ride in here without getting the creeps at the thought. They are just lying up there, and all they need is the slightest start and they would come roaring and tumbling down."

Tilting her head back, Sherry could see what he meant, and for the first time she understood something of the fear that Ross had for this place. One enormous slab that must have weighed hundreds of tons seemed to be hanging, ready to slide at the slightest touch.

It was an awesome feeling to be riding down here, with no sound but the click of their horses' hoofs, and to have those enormous rocks poised above them.

Yet once within the crater itself she forgot her momentary fears in excitement over the long level of green grass, the running water, and the towering cliffs of the crater that seemed to soar endlessly toward the vast blue vault of the sky. Great clouds piled up in an enormous mass in the east and north, seeming to add their great height to the height of the cliffs.

It was warm and pleasant in the sunlight, and they rode along without talking, listening to the lazy sound of the running water, and watching the movements of the few remaining great red and brindle cattle who were becoming more tame due to the frequency of their visits.

"There must have been more than six hundred down here, and probably would have been more, but there are a good many varmints around. I've seen cougars down here, an' heard 'em."

"Where are the ice caves?" Sherry demanded. "I want to see them. Rolly was telling me about the crystals!"

For two hours they rambled over the great crater and in and out of the caves. They found several where cattle and horses had been drinking, and whatever cattle they found they started back toward the trail. Then suddenly, as they were about to leave, Sherry caught Haney's arm. "Ross!" There was sudden fear in her voice. "Look!"

It was a boot track, small and quite deep.

Her breath caught. "It might be—Rolly?" Her voice was tight, her fear mounting.

"No, it wasn't Rolly." Mentally, he cursed himself for ever bringing her here. "That foot is smaller than either Mabry or Burt, an' a heavy man made it. Let's get out of here."

When they were outside, he could see the pallor of her face in the last of the sunlight. He glanced at the sky, surprised at the sudden shadows although it was drawing on toward evening. Great gray thunderheads loomed over

the crater, piling up in great, bulging, ominous clouds. It was going to rain, and rain hard.

Leading the way he started for the horses, every sense alert and wary, yet he saw no one. His movements started the cattle drifting again, and as they reached the horses, he told her, glancing at the sky:

"You go ahead. I think I'll start the rest of the cattle out of here while I'm at it."

"You can't do it alone!" she protested.

"I'll try. You head for home now. You'll get soaked."

"Nonsense! I have my slicker, and—" her voice faded and her eyes fastened on something beyond Ross' shoulder, widening with fear and horror.

He knew instantly what it was she saw, and for a fleeting moment he considered making his draw as he turned, but realized the girl was directly in the line of fire.

"And so, after so long a time, we meet again!" The voice was that of Star Levitt. But there was a strange tone in it now, less of self-assurance and something that sounded weirdly like madness, or something akin to it.

CAREFULLY, Ross Haney turned and met the eyes that told him the worst.

All the neatness and glamour of the man was gone. The white hat was soiled, his shirt was dirty, his face unshaven. His eyes were still the large, magnificent eyes, but now the light of insanity was in them. Haney realized the line between sanity and something less had always been finely drawn in this man. Defeat and frustration had been all that was needed to break that shadow line.

"Oh, this is great!" Levitt chortled. "Today we make a clean sweep! I get you, and later, Sherry! And while I am doing that, Chubb and Berdue will finish off Mabry and Burt. They are up on the mesa now, waiting for them!"

"On the mesa?" Haney shrugged. "They'll never surprise the boys there. Whenever one of us has not been on the mesa all day, we are very careful. We've been watching for you, Levitt."

Star smiled. "Oh, have you? But we found our own hiding place! We found a cave there, an ideal spot, and that's where they'll wait until they can catch Mabry and Burt without warning them!"

"A cave?" Ross repeated. Horror welled up within him and he felt the hackles rising along his neck and his scalp prickled at the thought. "A cave? You mean you've been in that cave on the mesa?"

Levitt smiled. "Only to look, enough to know that it was an ideal hiding place. At first, I planned to stay, too, but then when I saw you two leaving the mesa and heading for the lava beds, I decided this was a better chance. Besides," he glanced at Sherry, "I want her for awhile—alone. She needs to be taught a lesson."

Ross Haney stared at him. "Levitt, you're mad! That cave where those men are hiding is a death trap! If they aren't within a few feet of the opening, they won't have a chance to get out of there alive! Did you see that black hole in the center? That's a geyser! Those men will be trapped and drowned!"

Levitt's smile vanished. "That's a lie, of course. If it isn't, it won't matter. I was through with them, anyway. And Mabry and Burt are small fry. It is you two that I wanted."

Ross Haney had shifted his position slightly now and he was facing Levitt. His heart was pounding, for he knew there was only one chance for them. He must draw, and he must take a chance on beating Levitt to the shot. He would be hit, he was almost sure, but regardless of that, he must kill Star Levitt.

Wes Hardin had beaten men to the shot several times when actually covered with a gun. There were others who had done it, but he was no fool, and knew how tremendously the odds weighed against him. Thunder rumbled and a few spatters of rain fell.

"Better get your slicker, Sherry," he said calmly. "You'll get wet!"

His eyes were riveted upon Star Levitt, but what he waited for happened. As the girl started to move, Levitt's eyes flickered for a fraction of an instant, and Ross Haney went for his guns.

Levitt's gun flamed, but he swung his eyes back and shot too fast, for the bullet ripped by Haney's head just as Ross flipped the hammer of his gun.

Once! Twice! And then he walked in on the bigger man, his heart pounding, Levitt's gun flaming in his face, intent only upon getting in as many shots as possible before he was killed.

A bullet creased his arm and his hand dropped. Awkwardly, he fired with his left hand gun, and knew the shot had missed, yet Star Levitt, his shirt dark with blood, was wilting before his eyes, his body fairly riddled with the bullets from Haney's first, accurate shots.

Ross held his gun carefully, then fired again, and the shot ripped away the bridge of Star's nose, smashing a blue hole in his head at the corner of his eye.

Yet he wouldn't go down. The guns wavered in his hands, then as his knees slowly gave 'way, some reflex action brought the guns up. Both of them bellowed their defiance into the pouring rain, their flames stabbing, then winking out. As the echoes of the gunfire died there was only the rain, pouring down into the crater like a great deluge.

Sherry rushed to him. "Oh, Ross! You're hurt! Did he hit you?"

HE turned dazedly. He didn't feel hurt. "Get into that slicker!" he yelled above the roar of the rain. "We've got to pull out of here! Think of those rocks in this rain, and the lightning! Let's go!"

Fighting his way into his slicker, he saw the girl mount, and then he crawled into the saddle. The cattle moved when he started his horse toward them. Suddenly, he made a resolution. He was taking them out—now.

Surprisingly, the big steer who took the lead seemed to head into the cleft of his own choice, or possibly because it seemed to offer partial shelter from the sweep of the rain. Perhaps because he had seen so many of his fellows go that way in the weeks past.

Waving the girl ahead of him, Ross followed on into the cleft, casting scared glances aloft at the ruge rocks. "Get on!" he yelled. "Get going!"

He glanced up again as they neared the narrowest part. Horror filled him, for the great, hanging slab seemed to move!

"Hurry!" he yelled. "For heaven's sake, hurry!" He grabbed a stone and hurled it at a loitering steer and the animal sprang ahead.

Sherry cast a frightened look upward and her eyes widened with horror. Her face went stark white as though she had been struck.

A thin trickle of stones fell, splashing into the cleft. A steer ahead stopped and bawled complainingly, and Ross grabbed a chunk of rock from the bank and hurled it, and the steer, hit hard, struggled madly to get ahead.

Sherry moved suddenly, closing up the gap between her horse and the nearest cattle, harrying them onward with stones and shouts. Ross looked up again, and caught as in a trance, he saw the great slab stir ponderously, almost majestically. Its tablelike top inclined and then slowly, but with gathering impetus, it began to slide!

Shale and gravel rattled down the banks, and Ross touched spurs to his horse. The startled palouse sprang ahead, forcing Flame into the steers, who began to trot, and then as the two horses crowded up into the folds of lava, but out of the cleft in the crater wall, the air behind them was suddenly filled with a tremendous sound, a great, reverberating roar that seemed to last forever.

The rain forgotten, they sat, riveted in place, listening to the sound that was closing the crater forever, and leaving the body of Star Levitt as the only thing that would ever tell of human movement or habitation.

Yet as they remembered what Star Levitt had said about Berdue and Emmett Chubb, they unconsciously moved faster, and once out of the lava beds they left the cattle to shift for themselves and turned toward the mesa trail.

There was no letup to the rain. It roared down in an unceasing flood. They bowed their heads and hunched their slickers around them. The red of Flame's coat turned black with wet. Under his slicker, Ross rode with one hand on his gun, hoping for no trouble, but searching every clump of brush, every tree.

Rolly Burt ran from the cabin and grabbed their horses when they swung down. "Hustle inside an' get dry!" he yelled. "We've been worried as all get-out!"

When they got inside and had their slickers off, Mabry looked up, rolling a smoke. "Burt thought he saw Chubb today. We were worried about you."

"You haven't seen them?" Ross turned on him sharply.

Burt came in, overhearing the question. "No, an' I'm just as well satisfied. Say!" he looked up at them. "That danged geyser sure gives off some funny noises! I was over close when it sounded off the last time this afternoon, and I'd of swore I heard a human voice a screechin'! That's one reason we have been worried about you two, although Bill did say you rode off the mesa!"

Sherry's face blanched and she turned quickly toward an inner room.

Rolly stared after her. "Hey, what's the matter Did I say something wrong?"

"No, just forget about it. And don't mention that geyser again!" Then he explained, telling all that had happened during the long, wet afternoon, the end of Star Levitt, and the closing of the great cleft.

Sherry came out as they finished speaking. "Ross, those poor men! I hated them, but to think of anything human being caught in that awful place!"

"Forget about it. They asked for it, and now it is all over. Look at that fire! It's our fire, in our own fireplace! Smell that coffee Mabry has on? And listen to the rain! That means the grass will be growin' tall an' green next year, honey, green on our hills an' for our cattle!"

She put her hand on his shoulder and they stood there together, watching the flames dance, listening to the fire chuckling over the secrets locked in the wood, and hearing the great drops hiss out their anguish as they drowned themselves in the flames. A stick fell, and the blaze crept along it, feeling hungrily for good places to burn. From the kitchen they heard the rattle of dishes and the smell of bacon frying, and Rolly was pouring the coffee.

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Coming Next Issue—Look Forward to It!

Pinetree jumped aside, his right hand gun barking

The Woods Colt

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

When Pinetree Cowan shakes off the waters of self-pity, the killing Borsons flee hillward to escape the flood of wrath!

CHAPTER I

Cut Down to Size

PINETREE COWAN had known ever since he could remember that one day he was going to have a showdown with the Borsons. As he saw the four mountain ranchers trooping into the livery stable and heard their whisky talk, he felt that the time had come.

He leaned his pitchfork up against the stable he was cleaning and came out to the front where the four men waited. He was a lean youth, a little too tall for his weight, with shoulders too broad for his hips. Somehow, the mark of the mountain man still clung to him here in Ti Valley. He wore a kind of resigned acceptance of his lowly job, coupled with a resentment for the world which had looked down on him for too many years.

These Borsons were tall men, too; rawboned, big nosed men, and everybody in the county knew they were mean when they were drinking. The two older brothers, Buck and Russell, were quiet jaspers and didn't talk much, but Buck's two sons, Joel and Mark, as

an action novelet

though trying to prove to their elders that they were grown up, had a way of raising their voices when they talked, proud of being known as part of that tough Borson bunch.

"Hey, you!" young Joel barked loudly. "Git our horses saddled, and hurry it up, feller."

Pinetree held back the retort which he would have liked to make. "All right," he said. "Four of 'em at fifty cents. That'll be two dollars please."

He waited. None of the Borsons made a move to produce the money.

"Well," Joel said impatiently. "Git the horses."

"Mr. Dobson said for me to collect first," Pinetree answered evenly.

OLD Buck Borson, leaning against the wall, said to Joel, "You ain't lettin' him bully you around, are you, son?"

"Why there ain't no stinking livery stable chambermaid even *fixing* to bully me around!" Joel Borson hitched up his levis with a strutting gesture and snarled at Pinetree. "You damned low-life woods colt, git them horses saddled before I—"

Pinetree's temper burst its restraint, and the fist which he laid on the loud mouth's jaw made a sound that was good to his ears.

The pain of the blow ran up his arm clear to his shoulder, but the sight of the youth crashing back against a grain bin made it a pleasure.

Then Joel Borson's brother slipped in behind him and slugged him back of the ear, knocking him down on top of the youth he had just floored.

Thoroughly mad now, Pinetree got to his feet and waded into the second brother. Mark Borson was taller than Pinetree and heavier, and his rocky fists hurt Pinetree plenty. Mark Borson wasn't as gabby as his brother, but now his eyes were narrowed and ugly, his lips tight over his big yellow teeth. Mad dog mean, he would beat Pinetree to the floor and stamp on him if he could.

And Pinetree knew it. He had a fight on his hands, one which gave him a deep satisfaction after all these years of hating the Borsons, but one that left him cold, too, for he felt that it was a useless kind of fight. All he could get out of it would be a good licking and a worse reputation. It had always been that way.

He couldn't help it. But he couldn't help fighting either.

He straightened Borson up with a hard smash, and Borson grunted. Borson took a deep breath, struck at him and missed. As Mark Borson's fist went by Pinetree's head, Pinetree crashed one into his face which sent him reeling backward.

Pinetree followed him up, but Borson stepped inside the blow and wrapped his arms around Pinetree, burying the top of his head in Pinetree's face. The stableman worked the heel of his hand between them, slammed it under Borson's chin, shoved powerfully upward, abruptly breaking Borson's hold and almost snapping the man's neck at the same time.

That was when a full bottle of whisky crashed down on Pinetree's head, knocking him clear out the front door and to the ground.

His head swam in a sea of pain and the fumes from the broken bottle invaded his lungs and made him gasp for breath.

HE hardly knew anything for a moment, but gradually he became conscious enough to know that quite a crowd had gathered, and Buck Borson was talking.

"We just came after our horses peaceable, but this flunkey figgered we didn't git our money out to pay the feed bill quick enough to suit him. Anyway, he got right insultin' and when my boy Joel objected, Pinetree flew off the handle and lit into him. Damned shame, Dobson, a man can't leave his hoss in yore stable without gettin' insulted by your hands. I ought to hold it against you—"

"Now, Buck," came Dobson's squeaky voice, "you know how it is. I can't get decent help. Just have to take anybody that comes along. But he won't do a trick like that again because he's through here. I won't let my help insult the customers."

"Insult?" Buck Borson roared angrily. "It was assault, and maybe battery. If you don't have him punished I will. He attacked my boy with that bottle of whisky he must have been drinkin'. If I didn't take the bottle away from Pinetree and bash him over the

head with it, he'd have probably have killed my son."

Even in his dazed condition, Pinetree recognized the fear in Dobson's voice as the liveryman answered. Dobson was a squeaky man who wanted no trouble with anybody and squirmed like a fishworm to avoid it.

"Then he ought to be thrown in jail," Dobson agreed. "No help of mine is supposed to drink or argue with the customers. I'm a business man and I don't like it. Sheriff, I want Pinetree arrested."

PINETREE got to his feet groggily, put his hand to his scalp which was sticky with blood and for the first time saw the sheriff in the crowd. The officer looked him over carefully and then turned to the Borsons with an inquiring look.

"I reckon we taught him not to fool with us," Old Buck said. "But he ought to be throwed into the cooler to sober up, anyhow."

Dobson chirped, "If my customers demand it, you got to do it, Sheriff. I certainly ain't gonna have my business ruined—"

Sheriff Halsey was a rotund man with white hair, a white mustache and a round face.

His voice was filled with resignation as he answered. "All right. All right. I'll take him along."

The sheriff turned to Pinetree and said, "Come on, son. Let's be getting on. I've got work to do."

Pinetree wanted to knock old Dobson's head off. Dobson had insulted him when he had said that he couldn't get decent help.

He also wanted to whip all the Borsons at once.

But Pinetree knew it was futile. They'd just gang up on him. It was always that way. He had been an underdog all his life. No one had any respect for him and there were times when he became pretty well disgusted with himself. Between spells of blind rage at the injustice of people, he would sink into an attitude of hopelessness. There just wasn't any use in anything.

He touched the open cut on his scalp with his hand and walked on down the street with the sheriff. He heard boastings from the Borsons behind him, but pretended that he had not.

CHAPTER II

The Man Within

THE Ti Valley jail was a small, native stone building with two cells in the back and Sheriff Halsey's desk in the front. Halsey sat down behind his desk, got out a box of cigars and offered one to Pinetree.

Pinetree said, "No, thanks. I don't smoke."

"Want a drink? You know, kind of hair of the dog that bit you?"

"No, much obliged. I don't drink."

Halsey opened his eyes. "You smell like a distillery," he said.

"You know that one of them Borson's broke his bottle over my head," Pinetree answeared wearily. "It's on my clothes, not my breath."

Halsey looked puzzled a moment, studied his cigar, then said, "Just what did happen down there? You didn't have your say."

"What's the use?" Pinetree answered. "They'd just lie out of it, Dobson and all."

"Suppose you tell me anyhow."

Pinetree shrugged. "Dobson told me not to give the Borsons their animals till they paid their livery bill. They tried to take them without paying, and I wouldn't let them have 'em. Then they got insulting and I hit Joel. Then his brother took it up, and when I had him about licked one of the older men hit me with the bottle. Then Dobson came in and then you came, and that's all."

Halsey thought about this a few moments before answering.

"Dobson would do that," he mused. "He wanted his money, but was afraid to demand it from the Borsons, so he left you to collect it. The Borsons were drinking and looking for trouble. Lying their way out of the mess was their idea of a smart trick."

"So I'm the one who goes to jail," Pinetree said bitterly. "Well, lock me up and be done with it!"

Halsey said, "Son, for a young man, you talk mighty down in the mouth."

"Why shouldn't I? I've been getting raw deals like this all my life. It ain't anything new to me."

"Had trouble with the Borsons before, have you? They're neighbors where you came from, ain't they?"

"Not open trouble, but they're responsible for everything that went wrong with me."

"Seems like I heard them and your dad had trouble a long time ago."

MAYBE it was because the sheriff was the first man who had ever shown any sympathetic interest in him; maybe it was because it had stuck in his craw for so many years. Anyway, Pinetree found himself pouring out his bitterness to the man who was supposed to have him under arrest.

"My dad and mother settled here in the Indian Nation over twenty years ago, and they were the only whites here until Buck and Russell Borson came and settled in the next mountain valley. There was trouble over them stealing our cattle. During a fight that followed, the Borsons got my father cornered in one of those little sandstone caves. They threw a stick of dynamite in after him. It didnt' kill him, but it just as well have. It busted his eardrums and tore him up so that he wasn't nothing but a wreck from then on. Killed his spirit completely.

"Me and my mother kept him alive, but we got as poor as Job's turkey. I was just a kid, but I had to go out and shoot and trap food to eat. I sold skins enough to buy me a calf once in a while, trying to get us a new herd built up, but the critters disappeared as fast as I could pay for them.

"The Borsons got them, I know, but I couldn't prove it. I couldn't go up and start killing them either, much as they deserved it. They'd run cattle over our land and just laugh at us. My dad was too whipped to fight back, and I couldn't lick them all."

"Folks usually stop a thing like that with a gun," the sheriff observed, and then watched for the answer.

"I could maybe have killed one or two of them, but I couldn't have got them all without bushwhackin', and I'm not a bushwhacker. I can outshoot any of them, but if I had killed any of them, the others would have killed me.

"I couldn't afford to get killed because my mother was also crippled by then, and she and my father had to eat. They're both dead now, though."

SHERIFF HALSEY said: "You were kinda in a tough spot, young man. You couldn't afford to win a battle for fear of losing a war." He got to his feet. "Anyhow," he added, looking at his watch, "what are you going to do now that Dobson has fired you?"

"I don't know," Pinetree admitted. "I've got to find a new place to sleep, then find me another job. I can't sleep in Dobson's hayloft any more."

The sheriff shoved his watch back in his pocket. "You're no drunker than I am, so you're not under arrest. But you can sleep here till you find a place. I've got to go over to Kiowa to meet a man comin' in on the stage."

The sheriff got to the jail door, then turned back and looked at Pinetree speculatively.

"You say your dad and mother are both dead now?"

"Yes."

"Then the reason that held you back from settling your business with the Borsons before, that reason don't exist any more, does it?"

Pinetree looked somewhat startled. "Why—no," he said slowly. "I hadn't thought of it like that—"

"You know," the sheriff said, "once I had to take a load of cattle to Kansas City, and I went to a circus there. Saw the animals and everything. There were some elephants in the menagerie and the trainer explained to the crowd that he gentled them by chaining their ankles to a stake in the ground.

"After the elephants became accustomed to having their ankles chained to the ground they could leave the chain off. The elephant just went on figgering that he couldn't get away, so he would just stay put.

"Lots of times since then I've wondered if there wasn't a whole lot of people acting just like them elephants did. I just thought you might be interested."

The sheriff turned and walked on out to catch his horse and ride over to Kiowa to meet the stage.

Pinetree washed the blood off his head and then lay down in one of the jail bunks. He felt very dejected and puzzled. He couldn't get the elephant story out of his mind.

Then, half an hour later he jumped up off the bunk and shoved his hat onto his head.

"Pinetree," he told himself, "you're the dumbest fool in the Indian Nation. There ain't been no elephant chain on your ankle since the old man died."

He walked out of the jail and down to the livery stable office. Dobson had a cashbook on his desk in the office and was entering some figures in it when Pinetree came in.

Pinetree caught him by the shirt collar and lifted him out of his seat, jerked him around and shoved him against the wall.

"Listen here, you skunk. Just because I was a backwoods boy, you gave me only five dollars a week instead of the ten you always paid for the same work.

"You wanted your money from the Borsons, but you were afraid to ask for it while they were drinking, so you ducked out and left me to collect it. When I got in a fight following your orders, you double-crossed me and took Borsons' side because you were afraid of them.

"You didn't treat me right. I've been working for you ten weeks. You're going to pay me that other fifty dollars you owe me, and then I'm going to whip your carcass from here to breakfast for that Borson trick. Get that money up in a hurry."

Dobson blinked at this new Pinetree, and started to protest, but he saw something in the youth's eyes that changed his mind for him. He dug up the fifty dollars and counted it out on the desk.

"I thought you was willing to work for five dollars," he said. "Of course, if you'd demanded more—"

"Never mind that," Pinetree snapped, putting the money in his pocket. "Now get your coat off, unless you want me to whip you with it on."

"Now listen," Dobson answered in a squeaky voice, "I'm a business man, not a rough and tumble fighter—"

"You're the man that told Borson you couldn't get any decent help. Did I do a decent job of work for my money, if you can call cleaning out a livery stable a decent job? Did I, or were you lying to Borson, just because you were afraid of him? Which?"

DOBSON paled. "All right, you did good work. Those Borsons are mean when they're drinking—"

"So you lied?"

"All right, I lied. But listen, Pinetree, don't hit me. You're strong—"

"Sure," Pinetree answered contemptuously, "and so are you. I ought to—" He drew his fist back, and Dobson shrank against the wall.

Pinetree found that he could not hit the man. Suddenly he felt strong, above the very person who had held him in such contempt only a few hours before.

"You can't hit a man that won't fight," Dobson whined. "It wouldn't be decent."

"No," Pinetree said. "I reckon I can't."

He looked at the cowering liveryman, and his hatred turned to pity. He found that he had somehow grown too big to be chained to a little man by hatred of him.

He turned and left the stable, walking back toward the jail with a new spring in his step, with a new squareness about his shoulders.

Somehow the town didn't look the same to him. Instead of being a lurking enemy, waiting to do him some kind of harm, even the buildings looked warm and friendly, looked as though they wanted him to call this place home.

He went down to the jail and went to bed in one of the bunks, not feeling that he was a prisoner, but that he was facing the first night of freedom that he had ever known. He went to sleep thinking of the Borsons.

CHAPTER III

The Square Shooter

HE was awakened soon after he had fallen asleep. He sat up in his bunk, seeing in the light of an oil lamp, Sheriff Halsey and a stranger. The stranger wore a badge which was in the form of a shield. Pinetree's nerves chilled for a moment, but quickly stilled. He was no longer afraid of anybody. Halsey, who had awakened him, said: "Son, come out in the office. I want to make you acquainted with Marshal Rainey. He's a deputy out of Fort Cloud."

Rainey was a rail-thin man of middle

age who had a grave face and eyes that could drill holes in granite. He had little to say, but Pinetree had the feeling that the man's eyes had read his whole life's history before he sat down.

"Here's a thing that might be what you're looking for," Halsey said after they were seated. "For several years there have been robberies of trains, stages and payrolls all over the Indian Nation and along the Red River bottoms across in Texas. Lots of them have been solved, but some of them haven't, and the ones that haven't been solved, have had a certain similarity.

"The U. S. Marshal's office has finally traced them all to the same group of men—and that group is the Borsons. They go out, pull a robbery, then come back here and hole up. The government has finally got a case against them, and Mr. Rainey is here to take them in.

"Knowing how you hate the Borsons, I figured you'd like to be in on the kill. It might be your luck, if we was to have trouble, to shoot one of them. That'd kind of repay you for what you've had to take at their hands."

"No, much obliged," Pinetree said. "I might have done it earlier, but right now, I wouldn't like to feel that I was repaying a grudge. It'd be kinda like being chained to my own past, if you know what I mean."

Halsey's eyes widened slightly as he heard his own chain story coming back to him. "You mean you're afraid of them?"

"No. I mean I *was* afraid of them, and hated them for that reason. Now, I am *not* afraid of the Borsons, and so I don't hate them and I don't want to waste my time fighting what's dead and gone. I'm much obliged for the tip you gave me about what was wrong with me, but personally, I just don't give a hang what happens to the Borsons."

Halsey and Rainey exchanged glances, and then Rainey spoke. His voice was soft and reflective, despite the sharpness of his eyes.

"When Halsey told me about you, I suggested that he put that proposition to you. I reckon neither him nor me expected his little talk to make such a quick change in you, but it's better this way, Cowan. Fact is, neither Halsey nor I could probably find the Borsons' place without somebody who knew those mountain trails well enough to lead us to it. You know those mountains and we don't. We need you. The government will pay you."

"That would be taking money to satisfy a grudge," Pinetree said.

Rainey's fingers beat a tattoo on the desk and a long moment of silence followed. Then he looked up at Pinetree. "Young man," he observed, "You've got a kind of strong will now that you see things in a new light, haven't you?"

When Pinetree did not answer, Rainey stood up, placed his foot on his chair and said:

"Cowan, maybe you haven't thought of this before. The Indian Nations have been filled with a lot of law dodgers and a scattering of respectable people like your folks were. Things are changing; more settlers are coming in. They're talking of opening up the Cherokee Strip to white settlers. Families are coming in here to make homes for themselves and it's not right that they be treated like your own dad was—hounded by a bunch of thieves and murderers. There's got to be law to protect them.

"You're a young man who knows what it means to be hurt by those gun bullies, and yet you're a big enough man not to go out and fight to satisfy a personal grudge. You hate crime but not the criminal. You're a man who knows this country, you can shoot, and you've got no dependents. It's going to take a lot of good men to make these Indian Nations fit to live in. Did you ever think about helping do that job? They'll be needing men like you."

THERE was something about the quiet but strong sincerity of the man with the burning eyes that affected Pinetree Cowan deeply. It showed Pinetree the man's purpose with a clarity which pushed him instantly onto the path his own future was to take. There was no need to think it over; Rainey had somehow in those few words shown him a living page of history and shown him where his place in that page must be.

"Do you suppose I could get a job like that?" Pinetree asked.

"They're looking for some good men at Fort Cloud," Rainey said. "I've got to deputize somebody to help me get those Borsons. They've robbed and killed. There are people who went hungry when Borson robberies broke their banks.

There are at least three decent men dead because they tried to defend themselves from those robbers.

"There is a small boy who didn't get out of the way of one of their horses quickly enough, and he's crippled for life. The Borsons have to be punished. I'll take you along as a special deputy, if you think you can take the job with a clear conscience now."

"I think I can," Pinetree said simply.

"Good. After that, we'll both know whether you should go along with me to Fort Cloud to talk to the Marshal about a regular job. . . ."

By daylight the trio was seventeen miles out of Ti Valley, following a narrow winding horse trail in the very heart of the low mountains. Some of these mountain valleys were thousand-acre flats surrounded by the steep walled hills—a few were larger, most were smaller. But always these flat pockets of grazing land were fenced by tree-covered, rocky slopes. The whole region was primitive, without roads or settlements.

"I've never been down here in the southeast corner of the Nation," Rainey said, as they rested their horses at the top of a rise and surveyed the wildness before them. "Natural hideout for law dodgers if I ever saw one."

"You could easier find a needle in forty acres of bluestem," Halsey admitted. "I reckon Pinetree and the Borsons is the only whites in the world that could find their way through here. They tell me Pinetree can track a wolf through this scrub from horseback."

While that was an exaggeration, of course, Pinetree was a natural tracker, and he had found little difficulty in following the Borsons. He was confident that they were headed for their own place, and he had merely to check the trail occasionally to see that they had not turned off.

They followed the trail on which they could all now see horse tracks for another two hours, and came at last to a high point where they stopped and rested their horses. They got down to stretch their legs and Pinetree took them to the highest point, from which they could look down into a long and narrow valley entirely surrounded by the rocky slopes.

There were three or four thousand acres of flatland deep in grass. A winding stream ran through it, and cattle grazed in several bunches at different points.

"That's their place," Pinetree explained. "The house is in the trees at the other end of the range."

"As pretty a setup as I ever saw," Rainey said admiringly. "Funny, ain't it, that men with such a fine place wouldn't be satisfied?"

"Well," Halsey drawled. "There's plenty of mighty respectable cattle barons down in Texas that got their start with a long loop. Reckon the Borsons figgered if they could steal enough, they'd be able to turn respectable, too. But how do we get to 'em from here? The trail seems to lead across the meadows, and they'll be able to see us coming while we're still three miles off."

"We're going to have to skirt around," Pinetree said. "And there's only deer trails."

"Then this is where your work really starts," Rainey observed. "From here on, all we can do is follow you."

CAUTIOUSLY they worked their way along the hillside for a good part of the morning, and came finally to a point where a stream ran downhill and on across the valley toward a clump of buildings about a mile below them.

The shot came just as Pinetree's horse stepped down into the stream. The second one followed it instantly.

Pinetree heard Halsey grunt and Rainey's horse scream, even as he slid off his own animal and ducked for the protection of a big hickory. He heard the sound of moving persons in the brush downhill, apparently following the creek bank.

He looked quickly back at his two companions. Halsey was down on his back beside the trail. Rainey had been thrown by his downed animal, and had rushed over to Halsey.

"All right?" Pinetree questioned Rainey.

"He ain't hit bad!" Rainey said.

"Take care of him, then, I'll follow these varmints." Pinetree could still hear the retreating ambushers, and he was eager to keep them within earshot.

"Wait a minute. Come here," Rainey said.

Rainey was on his knees, opening

Halsey's shirt. "Remember now, this is not a personal matter with you any more," he said. "You're not just a man matching guns with a bunch of killers. You're an officer of the law and it's your duty to do your job, but not to take any unnecessary chances. I'd go with you, but I can't leave Halsey unprotected. If you get them cornered, shoot three times for a signal. Good luck, Cowan!"

CHAPTER IV

Bullets Talk Louder

NOW Pinetree turned and started downstream. He was impatient at first that Rainey had called him back, thus lengthening the distance between himself and the ambushers to the point where he could no longer hear them. He checked the two pistols Halsey had furnished him. He smiled grimly.

Then it hit him forcibly. "You're an officer of the law!" He had often thought of the day when he would face the Borson bunch with guns, paying them off in lead for the misery they had brought upon his family and himself.

But Rainey had changed that now with a few words, had taken that possibility away from him. "You're an officer of the law!" Rainey was a good man and a wise one, and Rainey was right. Pinetree Cowan was an officer of the law, not a man looking for revenge. It was good to have the council of a man like Rainey.

Pinetree followed the trail of the two ambushers, reading sign as he went. Then he saw the fresh deer track, and that explained to him why the marshal's party had run into the Borsons. They had been out looking for meat, and had heard the lawmen approaching. It was a bad break.

It took time for Pinetree to follow the trail, for the ambushers knew that strangers were after them and they were careful. But he followed it for twenty minutes and suddenly came to its end.

Pinetree had halted suddenly on the narrow trail when he came to a dense thicket of hawthorn brush. The tracks led around the edge of it, but Pinetree was too cautious to walk into such a good spot for an ambush. Instead, he made a wide circle around the thicket and approached it from the rear. Thus he saved his life!

Two lean men were behind the thicket, watching the trail. Pinetree recognized Mark Borson and his uncle Russell.

The youth's uncle was talking. "That was a blamed fool trick Joel done in the first place, makin' trouble in the livery stable when we was in a hurry. That woods colt, Pinetree, followed us with the law. We can't afford to have folks in this region against us."

"What difference does it make?" the young one argued. "We got Halsey and that stranger, and I'll tie that Pinetree's scalp to my belt before we go home to dinner."

"You kids won't never learn to think," the older man said. "When those three don't show up back in town, people will look for them."

"Trouble with you and pop is you're too scared of takin' a chance. Let folks know they'd better watch out and they'll be afraid to bother you."

"We done a pretty good job of keepin' away from lawdog trouble for twenty years," the old man remarked dryly. "You'll be lucky to do as well. Now we gotta get rid of this Pinetree. It ain't going to be easy, for he knows these mountains as well as we do."

"Let him come," the youth said scornfully.

Pinetree stepped up to within twenty feet of the pair.

"I'm already here, Mark! Drop your guns. You're under arrest!"

Both men turned as though they had been kicked in the back. Young Mark's face turned gray and his eyes narrowed. His body started turning, his arms bringing his rifle around with him.

"Drop it, Mark!"

Both the Borsons now faced Pinetree, their rifles cradled in their arms, hands on triggers. Both saw the two guns in Pinetree's hands leveled at them, but Mark Borson was scornful of the weapons because he was scornful of Pinetree. Old Russell had more sense. He stood and said nothing.

"Comin' up to back shoot us?" Mark

sneered. "Well, why didn't you do it, you stinking skunk trapper?"

"I didn't come to shoot you," Pinetree said, holding back his temper. "I came to arrest you—all of you—for bank robbery. I'm a deputy marshal now, and you'd better drop your guns and come along with me."

Mark Borson laughed harshly. "Now ain't that a joke? What'll they use for marshals next? Polecats?"

But even as he spoke, his rifle barrel came up and he triggered it. The powerful weapon sent a bullet through Pinetree's vest that blistered his side. Mark levered his gun to shoot again, but Pinetree shot him dead!

THE lawman turned his gun on old Russell Borson just as that man thumbed his hammer back and shot. Borson wasn't fast enough. Pinetree's lefthand gun sent a slug through the man's chest that knocked him sprawling into the thorny brush and left his rifle lying on the ground.

Pinetree examined the youth and saw that he was finished, then he kicked Russell's rifle out of the way and dragged the man out of the hawthorn briars and laid him on his back.

The old man's eyes were open and he was conscious. He cursed.

"That was a damned fool trick that kid done. He never would have had sense enough not to buck a six-gun in the hands of a man who was willing to use it. You can count me out of buckin' you. See if I'm shot bad, will you?"

Pinetree ripped the man's shirt open, saw that shot had broken a rib and was bleeding freely. He began bandaging it. Borson gritted his teeth and was quiet.

"Wearin' a badge now," he finally said.

"Yeah."

"I knowed the law would be here sooner or later. That fool kid—"

Both men heard the hoofbeats at the same time, and both recognized that they were coming from across the flatland in the direction of the ranch buildings.

The ambushers' first shots had apparently not attracted any attention, but the battle had brought the other Borsons on the run. Pinetree replaced the spent shells in his gun, then turned to the wounded man. Russell Borson was breathing heavily, his eyes closed.

Through the brush Pinetree could see the other two Borsons riding up to the foot of the hill. They dismounted and started walking up the hillside trail, both wearing pairs of six shooters. Young Joel was in the lead.

In a few minutes they came to the spot where Russell Borson lay, and old Buck knelt down over him. Joel looked at his dead brother, and began cursing. "Damn whoever done this—"

"I did it," Pinetree said, stepping out from behind the hawthorn brush. "Gents, elevate your hands."

Joel spun around, and his father looked up from his kneeling position.

"Pinetree!" There was contempt and disbelief in Joel's voice.

"Yes. I'm here to arrest you and your father. Drop your guns."

The wounded man spoke in a feeble voice. "Better do it, Buck. He'll kill you both."

Old Buck Borson got to his feet slowly, and there was an old man's wea-

[*Turn page*]

riness about him, though Pinetree could almost see him thinking this thing out. Pinetree had them covered, but chances were that he could not kill both of them before one of them got him.

"All right," Buck Borson said. "We won't make you no trouble. We'll—"

"Like hell we won't," young Joel Borson snarled, and his hands slapped for six-guns thonged low for a fast draw.

Buck shouted, "Joel, you fool!"

Pinetree jumped aside, his right hand gun barked and one of Joel's guns jumped out of his hand. But Joel took two steps forward and triggered his other weapon.

Pinetree's hat flew off and blood poured into his eyes, but he triggered carefully. His bullet drilled Joel Borson squarely in the chest. Joel's body slammed down, his head hitting a jutting rock though he did not feel it. He was dead.

PINETREE felt a sledgehammer hit him in the side and knock him back into the briars. The trunk of one of the thorn bushes held him up, and its springiness threw him back out into the fight. Old Buck Borson stood before him with both guns leveled and cocked. Pinetree's gun was not even pointed at the old renegade.

Pinetree dropped to the ground just a split second before Buck fired, and bullets screamed over his head.

Lying on the ground, he hoisted his Colt and drilled the murdering outlaw squarely between his crafty eyes. Old Buck fell across his brother's body and died, curses unspoken on his cruel lips.

Pinetree couldn't get up. He had a wound in his side, a hole in his leg, a furrow across the top of his head, and another slug he wasn't conscious of in the fat part of his shoulder. A great weariness was upon him. He wanted to do nothing but go to sleep.

But then it started raining. No, a man was standing over him, pouring water on his face out of a hat, and the man was Rainey.

"Feeling better, Cowan?"

"I don't feel what you'd call good," Pinetree answered, trying to sit up.

"Just lie still," Rainey said. "You're as restless as my other patient back there."

"Halsey," Pinetree said. "Is he all right?"

"Sure. Just got a flesh wound. He'll be able to help me get you down to Borson's house. He'll be along, though how anybody can find their way through this pine jungle beats me. Took me all this time to find you after I heard your first shots."

"I'm sorry," Pinetree said. "You told me not to kill them if I could help it, but they wouldn't have it that way. I sure wish they hadn't hit me in the leg, though," he added sadly. "I won't be much use to 'em at Fort Cloud—"

"You got hurt in the line of duty," Rainey said. "So you can figger your wages go on till you get well. After that, when I tell 'em that you're the only living thing outside of a bobcat who can find his way around in these mountains, I reckon your wages will go on as long as you're satisfied with 'em.

"Pinetree, I've got an idea that when the country fills up, most of the outlaws are going to make use of this neck of the woods. You'll be needed around here to handle things. You'll be lucky, workin' right in your own backyard."

Pinetree looked around at the green-clad hills, smelled the sweet scent of the pines, and heard the trickle of the clear stream on the other side of the hawthorn thicket.

"Yes," he admitted. "I would be lucky, workin' around home."

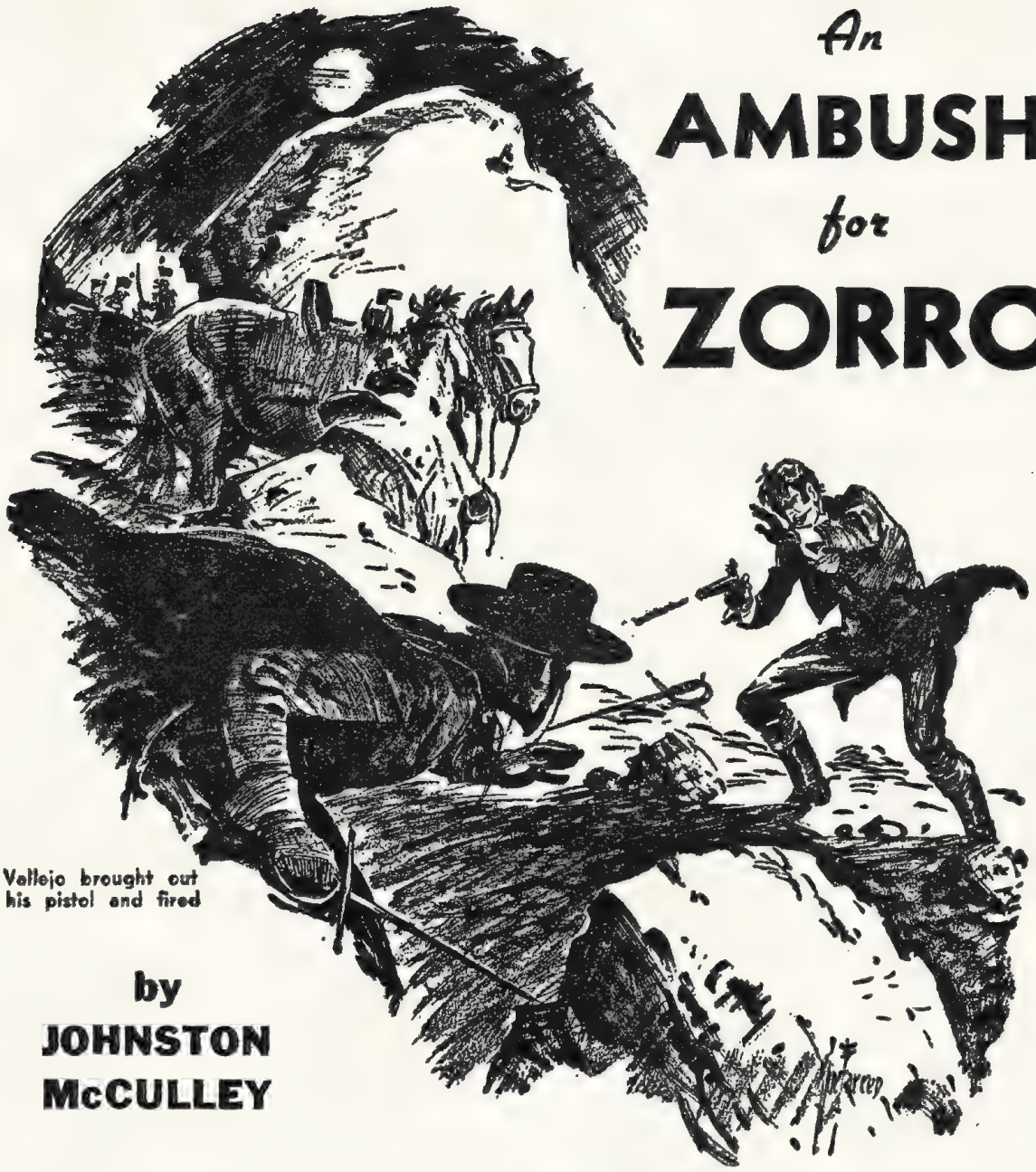
GRIZZLIES MEAN BUSINESS

A Gun and Game Feature

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

NEXT ISSUE!

An AMBUSH for ZORRO



Vallejo brought out his pistol and fired

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

FOR three days a torrential storm which had driven in from the sea had been drenching the coastline of Alta California from Santa Barbara to San Diego de Alcala.

Trees bent before the force of the storm. Some were stricken to earth by the angry blasts. Rills turned to rivers, hillsides were drenched, highways became tracks of slick mud. Stock on the open range at the ranchos stood with heads lowered and hides flinching beneath the steady pelting of cold rain.

In the pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles, the plaza had become a quagmire. The buildings were stained with dampness, the adobe walls spotted. Vegetation sagged with its weight of sodden foliage.

But dawn of the fourth day revealed a cloudless sky. By the time the sun was an hour above the horizon build-

Wily Soldiers Stage a Little Drama to Snare Don Diego Vega!

ings, trees and shrubs were steaming. Faint streaks of drying earth appeared on the roads, and people knew the storm was at an end.

They came forth to attend to business they had neglected during the storm, to make social visits, and to chat about other storms which had visited the land. And finally Don Diego Vega emerged from his father's house, his raiment resplendent as usual. He strode carefully around the pools of water to get to the plaza and go to the chapel.

There he visited for a time with aged Fray Felipe, the tender-hearted Franciscan who attended to all religious matters for the Vega family. When their talk ended, the padre went with Diego to the door and stood there with him. He had christened Diego and watched him grow to manhood, and being Diego's confessor knew things about him which other men did not know.

AS THEY talked, there was a sudden commotion at the corner of the plaza. In from the south along the muddy highway rolled four lumbering ox-drawn carts piled high with goods. Some trader's outfit, Diego supposed, that had been caught on the highway by the storm. The oxen and the high solid wooden wheels of the carts were plastered with mud. The men who goaded the oxen were wet and muddy also.

Ahead of this small caravan rode the trader on a good horse. He was yelling, and his long whip cracked, not at the patient laboring oxen, but at the backs of four men who staggered along a few feet ahead of him.

Diego and the padre saw at a glance that the four men were peons or natives dressed in rags, their feet bare. Even the continual application of the whip did not make them flinch and shiver more than the damp cold that had penetrated to their bones. They plodded along like dumb cattle, their heads bent, their countenances indicative of a state of utter hopelessness.

"What beast in human form is this?" Diego muttered, as he watched the infuriated face of the trader.

The carts were coming slowly along the side of the plaza, past the tavern. The man on the horse was berating the four he kept on the move by flogging, his shouts ringing around the plaza.

"Kick the mud, dogs! . . . I'll strip the hide from your dirty backs! . . . I'll soon have you in the cell room at the barracks!"

Men were emerging from the tavern and other buildings to see what was causing the commotion. The caravan came on toward the chapel, the leader shouting and the whiplash cracking.

In front of the chapel was a water cask with gourd dippers kept there by the padres for public use. The four unfortunates saw it, and with strange cries broke away from the lash to hurry toward it. Before the mounted man, who had glanced back at the carts, could reach them, they had grasped the gourd dippers and were running water into them from the spigot.

The rider turned and saw, gave a roar of rage, and spurred forward with whip uplifted.

The four men now were drinking like animals who had been thirsting for a long time, spilling the water over their chins and down their breasts in their nervousness. The lash sang and struck the back of one. As he reeled aside with a cry of pain, old Fray Felipe stalked forward angrily, his hand uplifted.

"Stop, señor!" the padre cried in a voice whose strength belied his years. "Are you an inhuman monster?"

"Ha, a padre!" the rider said, bending forward in his saddle with his wrists crossed upon the pommel. "A padre. One of the sort who pets vermin like these and makes them unsatisfied with their lot. Attend to your chapel, padre, and I'll handle those misbegotten sons—"

"Stop, señor!" Diego spoke this time. "You cannot address a *fray* in this manner."

"Can I not? And who are you, my fine señor, that tells me I cannot? A popinjay from your appearance, a pretty boy the señoritas like to chuck under the chin.

Diego straightened and his eyes flashed a little. But Sergeant Manuel Garcia, second in command at the presidio in Reina de Los Angeles, had come up behind Diego and the padre. The uncouth sergeant was Diego's friend.

"This gentleman you have addressed so is Don Diego Vega, señor!" Garcia thundered at the trader. "Use more respect when you speak to him!"

"Vega? Ha, I have heard of the Vegas," the man on the horse replied.

"They pet and pamper their peons and natives. They overfeed them and make life for them a bed of roses. Thereby they upset the balance of everything. Such acts make the scum get large ideas as to their importance."

THE four men had finished drinking and were huddled together trembling. Fray Felipe pointed to them.

"Look at these men! They seem to be famished, and were suffering from thirst—"

"They had some gruel at dawn yesterday," the rider cut in. "Thirsty? Pools of muddy water are along the highway; the earth is saturated with it. But then, of course, being in somewhat of a hurry, I did not give them time to stop and drink." He bent forward again and leered at the padre.

"Who are these men?" Sergeant Garcia asked.

"Two are peons and two natives, bound to me by the laws of peonage."

"And why do you treat them in this manner?"

"Because, señor, one of my carts started slipping over a cliff in the slick mud day before yesterday. These four men did not jump when I shouted to them to get at the cart, get the oxen free and save everything—"

"The cart would have crushed us all —it was falling already," one of the unfortunates wailed.

The rider raised his whip, but Sergeant Garcia motioned for him not to strike, and strode forward.

"Your name?" he demanded of the trader.

"I am known as José Vallejo."

"Vallejo is an honored name in Alta California, señor, and you will do well not to disgrace it—especially since I feel certain the name is not really your own."

Garcia had been appraising the rider carefully, and the latter grinned down at him. It seemed to Diego and Fray Felipe that the sergeant's manner changed slightly, and that he became a little respectful.

"Señor Vallejo, as you term yourself, it will be a fortunate thing for you if Zorro does not learn of your brutality to these men," Garcia said.

"Zorro? Ha! The masked man who rides a black horse and gallops around being chased by troopers who always fail to catch him!" Vallejo scoffed. "Sometimes I have thought you fail purposely."

Garcia's eyes glittered. "Such talk about the soldiery may get you into difficulties," he declared. "Where go you from here?"

"I intend to put these cattle in the prison room at the barracks for safekeeping, then take the carts to a camping spot a mile out the San Gabriel road," José Vallejo declared. "There I shall leave my oxen goaders on guard and return to the tavern for food and refreshment and mayhap some fun with dice and cards. After a day of rest, I shall take my caravan on toward Monterey!"

"Very pretty, señor. But first of all you will go to the barracks and report to the *comandante* and get his approval of your fine plans."

"Rather than bother traders continually with reports and such, you soldiers would do better to catch this Zorro,'" Vallejo said.

"If Zorro learns of your cruelty to these men, he may ignore the soldiers and punish you, señor. You will learn you cannot mistreat even peons and natives in such a manner with impunity," Garcia said. "I'll lead the way to the barracks, and do you give your arm a rest from wielding that whip."

Garcia strode off. The four unfortunates followed him, and José Vallejo rode behind them, cracking his long whip at intervals. Then came the carts, passing slowly, the oxen pulling with heads lowered, plopping great hoofs down into the deep mud.

Diego and Fray Felipe were left alone, standing side by side. Others who had been watching and listening went back into the buildings.

"Did you give this Señor José Vallejo particular attention?' Diego asked.

"Not particularly. What have you observed, Diego?"

"Notice how he rides. Is his seat in the saddle that of an ordinary trader? Or is it the seat of a military officer who cannot disguise the fact even out of uniform?"

FRAY FELIPE'S eyes gleamed an instant. "Ah!"

"And observe those carts, padre. The third one in line, in particular. There is not the slightest breeze at the mo-

ment, eh? Those carts seem to be packed with bales of hides on the way to market, do they not?"

"So it would seem, Diego."

"Then why should the bales in the third cart move slightly, especially at the end? With no wind, what would lift the corner of the covering a few inches?"

"What is your conjecture, my son?"

"That we have been watching a drama, padre. The trader is an army officer, perhaps on the personal staff of His Excellency the Governor. And the third cart has men in hiding, possibly soldiers, beneath that upper layer of hides."

"And the purpose?"

Is plain, padre. The fellow mistreats men who are unable to resist. That is a thing for which Zorro punishes men. There was mention of Zorro during the talk. The drama occurred where men could see and hear. Anybody who is friendly to Zorro's work would speak about it to others. And if Zorro hears of it, he may seek to punish this pseudo trader."

"Ah!" Fray Felipe said, his eyes twinkling again. "You think this is a trap to catch or slay Zorro?"

"I do, padre. Nor is that all. I saw a signal of a sort pass between José Vallejo and Sergeant Garcia, and after that the big sergeant treated Vallejo with more civility, though keeping up a pretense of censure. Possibly our *comandante* here, and Garcia, his second in command, know of a plot and were waiting Vallejo's coming."

"If Zorro should make a move, then, he might find himself in difficulties," Fray Felipe hinted. "Soldiers with guns would pop out of that cart, and the trader would become an officer most proficient with a blade. And our local troopers might be on the scene also."

"Quite true," Diego replied. "And if Zorro does not attack and punish the trader after his mistreatment of those unfortunates, those who now look to Zorro for help will lose faith in him."

"And what does Zorro intend to do?" the padre asked, looking straight at him.

"Zorro will take thought on it," Diego Vega said, smiling slightly.

Fray Felipe's reply was a whisper: "May good fortune attend you, Zorro, my son. . . ."

At home, Diego related the entire episode to his father, proud, dignified Don Alejandro Vega. The latter strode back and forth across the broad main room of the house, his head bent in thought.

"I believe you are right, Diego," he said, finally. "It is an attempt to ambush Zorro. Were it not for one thing, my son, I'd advise that you ignore the entire matter. But, as you say, unless you punish this José Vallejo for his brutality, those for whom you fight, those you seek to help, will lose faith in you. The instant a champion of the downtrodden shows he is vulnerable, the downtrodden shrug their shoulders and look for help elsewhere."

"I have decided Zorro rides tonight," Diego said.

"You will have to use great care, my son. Zorro has dodged pitfalls and evaded traps so far, and for that reason alone he must increase his vigilance."

Diego called a house servant and ordered that Bernardo, his mute peon bodyservant, be sent to him. And when Bernardo joined him in his own rooms, Diego spoke in a low voice that could not have been heard even by anyone passing in the hall.

"You have heard concerning the trader, José Vallejo?" Diego asked.

Bernardo nodded assent, and made a guttural sound which indicated his anger.

"Zorro rides tonight. Have the horse and weapons in the usual place at the usual time."

Bernardo's eyes gleamed. He bobbed his head and hurried from the room.

LATE that afternoon, Diego wandered around the house and grounds with a volume of poetry in his hand. But though he pretended to be considering the work of the poet, he was only listening to words and phrases dropped by the peons and native house servants as they lounged in their adobe huts in the rear, or went about their tasks in the patio and the house itself.

He learned that the four unfortunates had been put into the prison room of the barracks for safe-keeping. The cart caravan had made camp at the camping grounds on the San Gabriel road, and José Vallejo, leaving his oxen handlers on guard, had returned to the pueblo and was seeking relaxation.

That night there was a bright moon. Slipping out of the house, Diego went through the shadows to the abandoned storehouse a short distance away, where Bernardo was waiting. He had Zorro's black horse, costume and weapons.

Diego put the costume on over his other clothing, donned the black mask and hood, belted on his sword and stuck two pistols into his sash. To the pommel of his saddle he hooked the coiled long whip whose stinging lash had punished many cruel men. Diego Vega disappeared, and in his stead was Zorro. The pose of fop disappeared, and now a stern avenger mounted the black horse.

Since toddling babyhood, Diego had gone back and forth between Reina de Los Angeles and the vast Vega rancho in the vicinity of San Gabriel mission. He knew the country well even at night.

He rode carefully through the shadows, away from town and away from ths highway. Finally he turned toward where the highway curved between two hills. Screened by thick brush on a hillside, he looked down upon the camping ground.

A small fire was burning, and the oxen handlers were squatting around it, eating and drinking from a wineskin. The night breeze carried their voices to Zorro, but he understood only a snatch of talk now and then:

". . . Señor Vallejo will do the handsome thing by us if he succeeds in this . . . 'tis outrageous to doff our uniforms and be oxen goaders . . . we are more fortunate than our comrades in the cart . . . but they were out of the pelting rain at least."

So those men supposed to be oxen goaders were soldiers also, Zorro realized. Four of them, and possibly half a dozen more armed troopers in the cart beneath the covering of skins. And, for all Zorro knew, perhaps Sergeant Garcia and some of the troopers from Reina de Los Angeles were in ambush in the vicinity also.

Zorro got a pistol from his sash, aimed carefully and fired. The bullet zipped into the embers of the fire and sent them flying into the faces of the men squatting around it. The ominous crack of the weapon sang in their ears as it was echoed among the rocks. None had seen the flash of the pistol.

They sprang up in alarm and ran toward the carts, shouting at one another, their words betraying the presence of the hidden men. Zorro moved his black horse along the screen of brush and down nearer the highway. From this new position he fired again, after reloading his weapon. The second pistol remained in his sash untouched.

This time, the bullet thudded into the side of one of the carts. And this time one of the men had seen the pistol's flash. He yelled and pointed. Zorro gave a wild yell that rang among the rocks with multiplied sound, and at a curve where the light of the moon was cut off he rode across the highway and upon higher ground on the opposite side.

From a new point of vantage, he looked down upon the camp. He could hear the men jabbering. Those hidden in the cart had not been decoyed out of it by his shots. The oxen goaders grew quiet. They kept to the shadows cast by the carts. They were watching, listening.

ZORRO aimed his pistol and fired again, and yelled as he fired. The bullet struck a rock beside the road and screamed its song of ricochet. And now from the cart came men carrying muskets, six of them, and they darted to cover in the darkness and opened fire at the hillside.

Zorro rode behind rocks and sought cover and listened to the fusillade. He could understand the feelings of the men down in the camp. An unknown was shooting at them, a bullet might fly at them from any direction. They faced a mysterious enemy they could not even see.

He changed position and fired again. Once more his bullet struck a rock and glanced into the brush with a nasty whine. And again the muskets spoke until they were emptied of their charges, and the slugs from them whistled harmlessly among the rocks and clumps of brush on the hillside.

The wind was sweeping the sounds of firing along the curving highway, driving the echoes of gunfire toward the town. Then one of the men rushed across the highway to where a riding mule had been tethered for the night, and a moment later was bending low over the mule's neck and racing along the sloppy road toward Reina de Los Angles. He was carrying news of the mysterious attack to Señor José Vallejo, Zorro guessed.

Along the hillside, Zorro started riding cautiously toward the town. Before he had gone far, he heard hoofs pounding the road below him. The moonlight revealed seven mounted men. It glinted from the sabers at their sides. He heard the voice of Sergeant Manuel Garcia raised in stentorian orders. The troopers raced toward the cart camp. So, then, it *was* a plot in which the local soldiers were playing a part.

The troopers passed him and rushed on. Zorro rode down the hillside and stopped in a dark place at the side of the highway. The wind blew sounds from the town to his ears. Before long, he heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs. This time, a lone rider was approaching.

The rider came into view, his mount laboring in the deep slippery mud. The moonlight revealed him to Zorro as the man who called himself José Vallejo. He loped on toward where Zorro was in hiding.

Suddenly Zorro jumped his big black horse out of the shadows and swung him beside Vallejo's on the latter's right hand. The moonlight clearly revealed the masked man dressed in black, and the pistol held ready in Zorro's hand.

"Rein in, señor!" Zorro commanded.

"What is this?"

"I am Zorro, señor. Your little trap was not at all clever. Your men at the camp are afraid of shots from the dark. The troopers of Sergeant Garcia have ridden there, and no doubt are searching the shadows for me in a waste of time and effort. And here you are alone with me—beater of defenseless men!"

"And you, the brave Zorro, with a pistol in your hand!" Vallejo replied. "I appear at your mercy. So the trap failed? Know, then, I am no trader."

"Your seat in the saddle tells me you are an army officer."

"True. And you, I have often heard, are a wizard with the blade. Dare you fight me with that weapon, fairly?"

"I always fight fairly, señor," Zorro said, sternly. "But do you? Let us dismount here where the moonlight is bright enough for our purpose. I'll return my pistol to my sash when you have drawn blade."

VALLEJO growled an imprecation and almost threw himself out of the saddle. He led his horse aside, whipped out his blade, and stood ready.

"This is to be the end of you, Zorro," he boasted. "I have something of a reputation as a swordsman. No country lout like yourself can best me. I'll run you through, strip off your mask to see your face, and collect the Governor's reward as well as the promotion he has promised me!"

Zorro got down out of his saddle. He took the coiled whip from the pommel and attached it to his sword belt on the left side. He sidestepped to avoid a small rock, and whipped blade from scabbard.

Vallejo took the offensive. Zorro felt him out for a moment, and knew the other was good with a blade, but not so good as men Zorro had vanquished in the past. The footing was bad, and both were careful on that account. It was not a place for speedy footwork.

At any moment, Zorro knew, Garcia and his troopers might come riding back, for the wind was carrying the sound of the ringing blades down the highway toward them. And the man who had gone for Vallejo on the riding mule might return, see what was happening, and hurry back to the town for help, in which case Zorro might find himself between two fires.

A quick end of this must be made, but Zorro had no wish to end it by sending the point of his blade into his adversary's heart. He stood, then pressed the fighting, and as Vallejo retired before his onslaught Zorro's blade darted in. There was a ringing of metal and Vallejo's sword was torn from his hand to arch through the air, catching and reflecting the light of the moon, and crash against some rocks at the side of the highway.

Vallejo reeled aside. His hand went to his belt and he brought out his pistol. It was discharged, and the ball brushed against Zorro's left sleeve. Vallejo hurled the pistol, but Zorro bent and allowed it to go over his shoulder. As he did so he got his sword back into its scabbard, and suddenly the whip was in his hand.

Vallejo's wild cries for help were ringing down the wind. He hurled himself forward for a hand-to-hand clash now that Zorro was not holding a sword. But Zorro made no effort to draw a pistol and shoot him down.

The lash met Vallejo as he charged. It wrapped around his body, bit and

drew blood. It jerked him off his feet and sent him on his hands and knees in the mud. And then it fell upon him in a rain of blows, cutting his garments, lashing his body.

"The whip for being a craven and trying to pistol me!" Zorro said. "The whip because you used it unmercifully on defenseless men! I could have run you through or shot you down, but the whip is best for a man such as you."

He continued lashing as he talked. He beat José Vallejo down into the mud, broke his spirit, brought him to the stage of pitiful whimpering. Zorro stepped back.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Quickly, if you want to live! Get into your saddle!"

He jerked Vallejo to his feet. He tossed Vallejo's blade and pistol aside. He drove him lurching toward his horse and forced him into the saddle. Still holding the whip ready, Zorro started mounting his own horse.

Sounds came to him from the highway near the cart camp. He could hear Sergeant Garcia shouting to his men. Then came the noise of horses pounding through the mud with what speed they could.

Zorro rode his black beside Vallejo's mount. Vallejo was clinging to his saddle, bent forward.

"Ride! With speed!" Zorro ordered.

HE urged his black into a lope, then a slow gallop, and kept Vallejo's mount beside him. Sounds of Garcia and his troopers came nearer. But now Zorro was beyond the slippery hill, and got more speed out of his own mount and Vallejo's.

Around a curve, they went on at still greater speed. And toward them Zorro saw coming the man on the riding mule, who had ridden to town to warn Vallejo. He pulled the mule to one side out of the highway as the riders bore down upon him. Too late he realized they were Vallejo and a masked man.

Zorro lashed with his whip again. Vallejo's horse got part of the blow and sprang forward with added speed. But Zorro sent the black after him, and reached out to grasp Vallejo's reins.

They came to the plaza, and some peons scattered out of their path. In front of the tavern, Zorro pulled both mounts to a stop. The tavern door opened, and a streak of light shot out to mingle with the bright moonlight.

Zorro toppled Vallejo from his saddle. As the soldier yelled for help, Zorro cut him with the whip again. Men rushed from the tavern to see the punishment.

Garcia and his troopers were almost to the plaza now. Zorro whipped out a pistol and sent one shot over their heads. As they scattered to right and left, he spurred the black and dashed across the corner of the plaza, turning toward the mouth of the highway leading to San Juan Capistrano.

Pistols exploded behind him and bullets flew, but none came dangerously near. He bent low and rode furiously. A glance behind showed him that Garcia and his troopers were coming on, except one man who had stopped beside Vallejo.

Out the road a short distance, where there was a curve with high banks on either side, Zorro left the highway, rode behind a fringe of brush, and doubled back as Garcia and his men raced along the highway below him.

He got down into a depression and followed it carefully, circling to an old cattle trail. This he followed back toward the town. He swung wide as he approached, to come in from another direction. And in time he came to where Bernardo waited for him.

"Zorro has ridden well," he said to the mute, as he stripped off the black costume and tossed it aside with his weapons. "Take good care of the horse. Get the mud off him speedily."

Through the shadows, Diego Vega raced toward his father's house. He passed the huts of the servants unseen, went through the patio, got inside and went to his own room.

Within a few minutes, he had discarded the clothes he had been wearing, put on others, and wrapped a thick dressing gown around his body. He went into the hallway and to the big main room of the house, shuffling in his loose sandals. His father, Don Alejandro, was waiting. "All is well, my son?" Don Alejandro asked.

"All is well, my father. José Vallejo has been punished. No doubt the servants will be gossiping about it in the morning," Diego said. He reached for the goblet of wine Don Alejandro had been quick to pour, sipped, smiled slightly. "I believe I'll read poetry for a time, and then seek out my couch."

She brings that piece of timber down on Walt Riggs' head like a clap of thunder

Fiddlefoot's Return

—brings on a howlin', pinwheelin' free-for-all when he finds his shack burned down and a squatter in charge!

US citizens of Sandstone has allus claimed that Mayor Silver Carson kin out-holler and out-argufy Mayor Flint Tuttle o' Gumbo Flats. We gets to see these two dignified officials spoutin' off, face to face, as they endeavors to settle the case of Fiddlefoot Potter's burned down shack.

This Fiddlefoot hairpin is a long-legged, narrer lookin' waddie, with a long, straight nose, crossed eyes, and a cowlick which durn near pushes off his Stetson. He is a plumb explosive and determined character once he is riled up.

It seems that he rides over the hill from his one-room shack on a section of

a Sandstone story by FRANCIS H. AMES

land he owns in Prickly Pear canyon, lookin' fer his strayed milk cow. He gets to wonderin' what is over the next ridge, which is usual fer Potter, and keeps on wonderin' ontil he drifts down through Wyoming, Colorado, and Kansas. He finally winds up on the Texas Panhandle, or so he tells me.

He is gone two years, and we is beginnin' to wonder what happens to him when he sashays into the Last Chance saloon in Sandstone like he ain't been gone more'n twenty-four hours.

"I never did locate that alkalied milk cow o' mine," he says, "but I shore did see a heap of country while I was lookin' fer her."

"Howdy, Fiddlefoot," drawls Knothole Dobbs, cautious like. "Did you gather any moss in yore travels?"

"Moss!" echoes Potter, sadlike, lookin' at Knothole's drink. "Heck no, but I gathers a heap o' right painful experience."

"Painful?" questions Curly Ransome.

"Yes," says Potter. "It was shore awful. Feller boots me in the ribs in Wyoming and shoots my Stetson off. I gets me breather broke in Colorado with the butt end o' quirt and falls in love with a dishwasher. In Kansas I gets both eyes blackened and a ear tore loose. Them countries simple ain't civilized."

"What," pipes up Pa Higgins, holdin' his breath fer the momentous disclosure, "happens in Texas—or did you get that fur?"

"In Texas," says Fiddlefoot, real disgusted like, "if a feller stands still they sticks a knife in his ribs. Iff'n he runs they uses him fer target practice. I crawls out'n that state on my belly."

"So," says Curly Ransome, "you comes back to a plumb peaceable place like Sandstone. Where is you goin' to head fer next?"

"Head fer?" echoes Potter, glarin' at Curly. "I'm goin' to head fer my shack in Prickly Pear canyon! I ain't never goin' to roam more'n a hundred yards from the place long as I live."

"I regrets to inform you," says Knothole Dobbs, peerin' at the jasper with them sad eyes o' his'n, "that you ain't got no chimney leanin' shack no more. A sidewinder buys up the railroad section next to you, builds up a fine house, and burns yore shack down."

"Burns it down!" gasps Fiddlefoot, like he can't noways believe that such a catastrophe kin happen to him. "Why didn't you boys gun the jasper down? Is he alive and kickin' yet?"

"We figgered to," puts in Shorty Downs, "but the hairpin is such a ornery jasper that he won't let nobody on the place 'ceptin' Walt Riggs. When he sends east to New England fer his sister to keep house fer him we don't want to assault the outfit by force, so to speak. We decides to wait ontil you comes back to take up the onpleasant matter."

Fiddlefoot reaches over and grabs off Knothole's whiskey, which he has been eyin' ever since he arrives, and tosses her down at one gulp.

"I'll ride out," he declares, "and demand justice from this rattler. I is plumb determined to settle down permanent. No more wanderin' around fer me."

TIME we gets through celebratin' the permanent settlin' down of our old pal Fiddlefoot, said travelin' jasper is six or eight sheets in the wind.

"Don't call me Fiddlefoot no more, boys," he orates as he backs toward the bat wings, wavin' his hand in farewell. "From now on my monicker is Permanent Potter, the Pesky Puncher from Prickly Pear canyon."

He trips over his spurs and turns a somerset backwards into the street. The bat wings slam shut, hidin' the critter from view. We all stands there at the bar lookin' at each other, listening to Fiddlefoot singin' at the top o' his voice as he rides out.

"Permanent Potter o' Prickly Pear canyon has a heap o' surprises comin' to him," snickers Curly Ransome. "If he monkeys with that there Cameron Sprowl jasper what burns down his shack. That gent is plumb pisen."

"We'll ride out, come mornin'," declares Knothole Dobbs, "and see how he comes out on the deal. Justice must be done in this case. We can't have fellers' shacks burned down right and left thataway."

Fiddlefoot tells me later that he is plumb astounded when he sees this here new house settin' on the Prickly Pear landscape. He gets down off his bronc and squints at the thing, which is nigh a hundred feet long and painted up like a fire-wagon.

"Unless my eyes is plumb crossed," he mutters to himself, "there is the cap-

itol o' the United States, settin' smack across my property line."

Potter tells me that he ain't, as a rule, subject to pink elephants and such, so he is right eager to prove that this thing actual exists. He mounts and rides over into the yard, swings down and walks up to the place, feelin' of the wall real careful.

This is when this Cameron Sprowl jasper intercepts him, so to speak. Sprowl is a tall, dignified lookin' hairpin, with long whiskers and elevated eyebrows. He appears to be considerable startled, so Potter tells me later, when he discovers the Pesky Puncher from Prickly Pear canyon leanin' on his house.

"What in time's goin' on here?" he bellers, grabbin' Fiddlefoot by the shoulder and spinnin' him around.

"I'm jest makin' sartin," says Fiddlefoot, "that this here dairy barn is shore enough here. If she is I tears her down —plumb to the ground."

"Dairy barn!" bellers Sprowl. He grabs Fiddlefoot by the shirt front and jerks him clean off the ground while he lets fly with a wallop that flattens the feller's nose like a ripe termater. "Get off my place a'fore I tears you limb from limb!"

This is when the eastern female runs out and takes a hand.

"Cameron," she shrieks, "leave that poor man alone—you've knocked him half silly!"

"Half silly!" roars Sprowl, bootin' Fiddlefoot in the rear as he tries to rise to his pins. "He was plumb silly when he arrives! The man is dead drunk."

"Drunk nothing," declares Elizabeth Sprowl, who is a rather hefty heifer with a kind face. "I saw the man ride up. Drunk men can't ride a horse."

"They can't, huh!" snorts Sprowl, runnin' Fiddlefoot over to his bronc by the collar and seat o' his pants. "Well, my dear sister, you ain't been in the west long enough to know these characters. They kin ride when they is ory-eyed, rubber-kneed and plumb unconscious."

Although Fiddlefoot protests a heap, Sprowl hoists him on his bronc, boots the critter in the rear, and said animal dashes off at the gallop. Fiddlefoot sets in the hull as pretty as you please.

Potter admits to me later that he wan't in no condition to defend hisself from Sprowl's attack. But by the time he rides over and looks at his burned-down shack he gets real mad.

"What did you do that night, anyway?" I asks. "You was stickin' yore head out the rear winder, with a broke nose and black eye, when me and Knothole Dobbs and Curly Ransome rides in lookin' fer you the next mornin'."

"Well," says Potter, "I shore did have a time findin' a place to sleep around that outfit. I waits ontil them folks goes to bed, then I starts to prowl around, so to speak. I finds a half case o' prime bourbon in the root cellar. After I downs half a bottle and slips a few in my jeans I feels a heap better.

"I snuggles up to every critter on the place, tryin' to get comfortable fer the night, but it simply wasn't no use."

"You don't tell me," I says. "How come?"

"Well," declares Potter, "them chickens roost on a feller's neck, the hogs snore somethin' terrible, and the mice runs around in a gent's whiskers in the hay mow. Never did see such an outfit."

"What did you final do?" I asks. "That was a chilly night."

HE SHRUGS. "I decides," he says, "that seein' one room o' that shack was on my land, I had a perfect right to sleep in the thing, so I slaps open the winder and climbs in."

"Don't seem hardly possible," I says, "that you could have done such without old Sprowl hearin' you—special in yore condition."

"Didn't have no trouble a'tall," declares Fiddlefoot. "I jest turns all the stock loose, ties my throw rope across the door, and hollers 'fire!' Time Sprowl dashes out'n the door in his underwear, ketches his shins on the rope and does a high dive off the porch, his condition ain't any too good either."

"Still," I says, "seems to me like he'd discovered you."

"No such thing," declares Fiddlefoot. "That jasper is running around the barn, hollerin' like a Comanche when I hoists my carcass in the winder. Only trouble is I runs into a post in the confusion, so to speak, and blacks one eye."

I knows right off that Potter is tellin' the truth about this here mixup 'cause he is still in said bedroom when me and Knothole Dobbs and Curly Ransome rides in next morning lookin' fer him. Dobbs is all set to see that the feller gets

justice from Sprowl.

As we comes down into the spread we runs into Walt Riggs, who is sorta courtin' Sprowl's sister, Elizabeth. Walt is a big, swell-headed rannie, one o' the leadin' citizens o' the no-good town of Gumbo Flats.

All o' us Sandstone fellers has tried to get a look at this new woman what moves in among us, so to speak, but without no luck a'tall. It seems that Walt Riggs, bein' a all-around slick hombre, and ownin' considerable land and stock, is right welcome around the Sprowl outfit. He pulls up his bronc and gives us Sandstone fellers a sarcastic eye.

"What," he growls, "is you rustlers doin' here—packin' yore runnin' irons? Sprowl don't welcome no Sandstone owlhoots around here."

Now Knothole Dobbs ain't a feller to get sarcastic with real careless like. He don't like Walt Riggs anyhow. Knothole is a tall, skinny jasper, with washed-out blue eyes and a half-pointed dome which ain't got hardly any hair on it a'tall, but he is one o' Sandstone's most extinguished citizens. We is right proud o' him. Fer one thing, the gent is limber as a garter snake and kin lick his weight in wildcats.

"We is here," says Knothole, ignorin' Walt Riggs, and turnin' to Cameron Sprowl, who comes up about then, limpin' on one leg, "to look after the interests of one o' Sandstone's citizens—a gent by the handle of Fiddlefoot Potter."

"Sandstone citizens," snickers Riggs, "ain't got no interests, 'cept gettin' ory-eyed drunk and rustlin' folks' cattle."

"Where," inquires Knothole, stickin' to the point, and lettin' his pale eyes rest on Sprowl, "is Fiddlefoot Potter? He come out here last night to see you about his shack what you burned down."

"Do you mean," bellows Sprowl, turnin' blue in the face, "the rannie what I discovered leanin' on my house in a intoxicated condition last night—the gent what steals six bottles o' my liquor, ties a rope across my front door, hollers 'fire,' and turns all my critters loose?"

"It's right likely," drawls Dobbs. "Fiddlefoot shore was all broke up when he returns from foreign parts and finds that he ain't got no shack left to curl up in. Seems like he tries right hard to drown his grief, so to speak."

"Yeah," cuts in Curly Ransome angrily. "That was a owlhoot trick, Sprowl. Us Sandstone citizens holds you plumb accountable."

"Oh, you does, does you?" bellers Sprowl, wavin' his arms. "And how about the jasper pitchin' me off my front porch in the middle of the night, and stealin' six quarts of my redeye? You hairpins git off the place before I get my saddle gun out and draw down on yuh."

"T'ain't so," sudden bellers Fiddlefoot, stickin' his snoot out of the bedroom winder. "I only gets four quarts, all told."

Sprowl whirls and charges like a enraged buffalo. He grabs Fiddlefoot by his chin and swelled-up nose and yanks him out'a the winder like a pig out of a chute.

"Aha!" he bellers. "I been lookin' fer you, my good feller—now I commits murder."

Before any of us kin go to Fiddlefoot's assistance this hefty Sprowl heifer runs out of the house pell mell and hauls her brother off.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Cameron," she shrieks, "beating up on this poor man again? I knew he was in the bedroom all the time—I saw him climb in last night. He had to have some place to sleep after you burned down his little house."

"That wan't no house," bellers Sprowl, backin' off. "That was a cracker box."

"What is this all about, anyway?" inquires the lady, lookin' at Knothole. "You look like a gentleman."

KNOTHOLE DOBBS shore does know how to handle angry females. He pulls off his Stetson real polite like.

"Well, mam," he says, "your brother burns down this feller's shack. He simple wants another one built up like it—free of charge."

"Ha, ha, ha," bellers Sprowl, throwin' his head back and roarin' with glee. "I don't build cracker boxes fer nobody. You is crazy, mister."

I sees the red blood surge up in Knothole Dobbs' wrinkled neck. He hauls off with one o' them clatterin' swings o' his and ketches the laughin' hyena in the windpipe, knockin' him head over heels. The jasper sets up, lookin' plumb surprised. His Adam's apple goes up and down like the handle o' a water pump.

"Don't laugh at me, you brayin' jackass," Knothole growls.

"Stop it, stop it," cries the Sprowl heifer, stampin' her foot. "Fighting is no way to settle things. Why don't we call in the authorities to settle this question?"

"Authorities!" yells Sprowl, gettin' his wind back. "There ain't no law in Cannonball county—that's why I settles here."

"Oh, there ain't, ain't there?" snorts Dobbs. "Well, I'll admit that Cannonball county, bein' a plumb peaceable place, ain't got around to electin' a sheriff and such, but Mayor Silver Carson o' Sandstone will come out here and settle this deal, fair and square, and in no time a'tall."

Walt Riggs leans agin a post and laughs ontil his belly shakes.

"Mayor Silver Carson," he roars. "That overstuffed jackass couldn't settle nothin' fair and square—he's crookeder'n a corkscrew."

"Go and get him, Curly," snaps Knothole. "Get him here quick."

"In that case," says Walt Riggs, "I'll get Mayor Flint Tuttle o' Gumbo Flats. There is a jasper what can really settle things."

As them two waddies ride out in a shower o' dust Elizabeth Sprowl is washin' Fiddlefoot's nose with a dish rag. Seems we finds out later that the heifer even slips breakfast in to the hairpin before Sprowl gets up that mornin'. Fiddlefoot ain't a bad lookin' gent.

"I don't want no law in on this deal," roars Sprowl. "I kin settle my own affairs—with or without gunfire."

His sister looks at him real careful.

"Cameron," she says, "father shipped you out west because you were a disgrace to the family. I came out to keep house for you because you told me you had settled down. Now you burn houses and don't want it settled by a court. I've heard that western law was very fair—I'd like to see it in action."

"Settled down!" yells Sprowl, glaring at his sister. "Of course I've settled down! I'm a successful man. Where do you suppose I got the money to build this house?"

"That," says Elizabeth Sprowl, stickin' her nose in the air, "is what I'd like to know."

It ain't hardly no time a'tall until Silver Carson rides in with Curly. The Sprowl place is almost exactly in between Sandstone and Gumbo, so Walt Riggs shows up with Mayor Flint Tuttle about the same time. When I sees that Walt has fetched his salty sidekicks along, Rant Wilks and Dirk Kent, besides three other tough lookin' hairpins, I begins to get cold shivers up my spine. This makes eight o' them to our five—it don't look so good to me.

"What's the trouble here?" spouts off Mayor Silver Carson, lowerin' his pot belly to the ground, his long, silver beard and hair shinin' in the sun.

"From what Walt tells me," bellows Flint Tuttle, waddlin' over and glarin' around, "this is another one of you Sandstone outlaw holdups! These folks settles in our far-flung country in peace and contentment, so to speak; then this Fiddlefooted monster comes along and invades the privacy o' their home. It's a disgrace—I votes that we string the gent up."

He leaps over and shakes a fat finger under Silver Carson's nose.

"I demand," he roars, "that you have this evil character removed from the premises at once. Soon as this is accomplished," he says, jerkin' down his embroidered vest what has clumb up his brisket by the very vehemence, so to speak, of his oratory, "I shall insist that the newly formed county o' Cannonball elect a sheriff and a army o' deputies from Gumbo Flats to keep you Sandstone owlhoots from lootin' the country from end to end. The way it is, folks ain't safe in their beds."

"My, my," declares Elizabeth Sprowl, lookin' at the loud-mouthed official, "this is going to be interesting."

"Yeah, ain't it," I says, lookin' at them salty Gumbo hairpins, which is clustered around Walt Riggs.

"Madame," spouts Flint Tuttle, bowin' to the heifer, "I shall see that justice is done—backed by the authority o' Gumbo Flats."

WE ALL gazes at Flint Tuttle in some admiration. The cow country allus has a heap o' respect fer fellers what kin spout off these here educated words, so to speak. However, Mayor Silver Carson, bein' high educated hisself, ain't a'tall impressed.

He draws hisself up to his full height, sticks out his whiskers like a angry billy goat, and begins to orate.

"Is that so?" he says, glarin' at Flint Tuttle.

He sweeps off his Stetson and makes a real graceful bow to the lady, considerin' that he is too porky to bend over fur.

"Iff'n it wasn't fer the presence o' this beautiful heifer," he declares, turning to Tuttle, "I'd reply in kind to yore insults. As it is I'll simple state the facts o' this case, without givin' you yore just desserts."

"Ladies and gents," he bellers, real sonorous, "these folks has come to our beautiful land from New England, so folks tells me, to seek freedom and justice, and escape their dastardly ruler who dumps the tea in the Boston harbor and shoots the white out'a folks' eyes while they is climbin' Bunker Hill and can't noways defend theirselves, so to speak. The first thing they does when they arrives in this fair land o' ours is build their shack on another gent's land and set fire to his house."

He pauses to glare around like a wounded walrus.

"No doubt," he goes on, "but what this beautiful heifer here, is plumb innocent, and I would like to show her brother the mercy o' this court, but the outraged citizens has riz up and demands that law and order step in and settle this deal o' juris prudence epso factum without no more foolishment."

He blows his nose on a handerchief the size of a saddle blanket with such vehemence that the Sprowl broncs spook out'a the corral.

We Sandstone fellers all clap to beat the cards although we ain't got no idee whatever what the mayor has said.

"I find," Silver goes on, "after reviewin' the case from end to end, forard and backard, that a distinguished citizen o' Sandstone, travelin' in Texas and other foreign parts, returns to find his home and hearth burned to the ground. This, mind you, without resort to the delirium compreehende o' the due process o' law."

"Distinguished citizen my eye," roars Flint Tuttle angrily, pointin' his finger at Fiddlefoot. "This drunken, cross-eyed hairpin ain't a citizen o' nowheres. His stovepipe leanin' shack wan't nothin' but a blot on the fair landscape o' the county. Sprowl done the upright community o' Gumbo Flats a grand service by settin' fire to it."

"Are you talkin' about me?" howls Fiddlefoot, totterin' over to shake his fist under Tuttle's nose. "I'll have you understand that my name ain't Fiddlefoot no more. My monicker is Permanent Potter, the Pesky Puncher from Prickly Pear canyon."

"Pesky canyon from Prickly Pear Puncher," echoes Tuttle. "In that case, ladies and gentlemen, this court is adjourned—the hairpin what has his shack burned down was a gent by the name o' Fiddlefoot Potter. This here feller has no standin' in this court."

This here is shore a fast legal maneuver what Tuttle tries to put over, but Carson is too plumb slick fer him.

"Not so fast, not so fast," he snorts. "The defendant announces the change in his name last night real legal in the Last Chance saloon. I declares that The Pesky Canyon from Permanent Pear is none other than Fiddlefoot Potter o' Sandstone."

"To be legal, in Sandstone," drawls Walt Riggs, "it would shore have to be declared in a saloon. That's all they is in the place."

"I protest," bellers Flint Tuttle, gettin' blue in the face. "This here is all done to confuse the issue."

"The issue be blowed," howls Carson. "The gent what has his shack burned down is Pesky Pear from Permanent and I hereby orders Cameron Sprowl to build him a new house, as good as the one he burned down, and pay fer the land what his shanty sets on, at the rate o' two dollars a acre."

He surveys the house carefully.

"That'll be two bits fer land," he says.

Elizabeth Sprowl's face lights up like a Christmas tree.

"I knew," she crows, "that I could depend on western justice—nothing could be fairer than that."

I SLAPS Fiddlefoot on the back, knockin' him flatter'n a flounder.

"Corngratulations," I bellers. "I knew you could depend on Mayor Carson."

"I won't do it," howls Sprowl, leapin' over to shake his fist under Carson's nose. "You are nothin' but a old fraud. You ain't got no more right to act as a judge than I has. I'll appeal to a higher court."

"There ain't," intones Carson, real dignified, "no higher court than the Mayor o' Sandstone, backed up by Knothole Dobbs and his boys. My decision is more'n fair. By rights the Pesky Pear

from the Prickly Permanent has suffered humiliatin' indignation in addition to the loss o' his home. Besides he has a broke nose."

"Don't let 'em talk you into it," roars Flint Tuttle. "I, too," he bellers, "has come to a decision in this matter. Fiddlefoot Potter, alias the Pesky Pear, alias Potter's Permanent, alias Kid Canyon, will scoot out'n the country a'fore we gets riled up and telegraphs him home."

"Are you shore," asks Carson, gettin' deadly calm like, "that this here monstrosity is on your land, Fiddlefoot?"

"You're durn tootin'," says Potter. "I glares down the line at her last night."

"Where," asks Carson, "does your land cross through it?"

"Right where this room what I jumps in last night joins on."

"Then," declares the dignified Sandstone official, "seeing that this Sprowl hairpin defies the orders o' this court, and this here Gumbo Flat nit-wit gets so all fired important, I changes my decision.

"I hereby appoints," he orates, "Knothole Dobbs to collect the necessary jaspers to saw off said room and move it over to the Canyon Kid's waterhole. I has spoken."

"You fergets," roars Flint Tuttle, leapin' over to shove his whiskers in Carson's face, "that there is eight o' us here to yore five. Touch that house and we'll massacre you."

"Ha," snorts Carson, reachin' out to grab Tuttle's two foot Stetson brim with both hands and yankin' down with all his strength, "you will defy the orders o' this court, will you?"

The Gumbo official's head bursts out the top o' his sombrero as Walt Riggs and his boys move in, howlin' like drunken coyotes.

In one minute flat we is at it, hand and foot. Knothole Dobbs meets the charge in his usual free-wheelin' manner, knockin' Dirk Kent pinwheelin'. As he lands, all spraddled out behind Mayor Tuttle, Silver Carson boots the dignified faker in the brisket. Tuttle topples over the downed Gumbo Flatter and don't rise no more durin' the fracas. I'm too busy myself to swear by it, but Fiddlefoot says he is down, too, most o' the time and he tells me the Gumbo official never does get clean to his pins agen.

I has allus claimed that any Sandstone citizen kin outclaw any two Gumbo fellers, while Knothole Dobbs' kin take on three or four to once. However, in this deal these three new Gumbo outlaws is right shifty jaspers and Fiddlefoot ain't no account whatever. Seems like Walt Riggs flattens the cross-eyed rannie three times faster'n he kin get to his pins. Then Curly Ransome gets flung in the air six feet and lands on the pore gent. He don't get up no more, bein' plumb fresh out'a wind.

This Sprowl character ain't nobody's pet kitten neither—he really unwinds with considerable agility. If it wan't fer Knothole Dobbs clatterin' wallops, and the fact that Elizabeth Sprowl is sore at her brother fer not acceptin' the all-around fair decision o' Silver Carson, we wouldn't have come out on top the heap a'tall. Besides, this female has taken a shine to Fiddlefoot, which none of us kin noways figger out. She goes plumb berserk, so to speak, when she sees the gosh-awful beatin' Walt Riggs gives him.

She grabs up a four-foot board and lays about her like a locoed elephant. She swings that splinterin' piece o' timber back, slappin' Dirk Kent in the features while he is in full charge, and brings it down on Walt Riggs' head like a clap of thunder. All told, this calm-lookin' blonde heifer accounts fer three Gumbo rannies, one after the t'other. She is shore a whirlin' dervish all to once.

Knothole and me finishes off the balance o' them insultin' hairpins in short order, with Dobbs heavin' them whistlin' swings o' his'n around at all angles, boundin' around like a catamount. T'ain't three minutes after that Sprowl filly gets into the waltz before them Gumbo Flatters and Sprowl is in full flight across the prairie.

Mayor Flint Tuttle is ridin' back-'ards in his hull, still wavin' his arms and bellerin' to beat the cards. A couple gents what ain't in no shape to climb their broncs is boosted on by me and Dobbs. Then we resumes the business o' gettin' Mayor Carson's orders carried out. Knothole Dobbs ain't no feller to go agen the orders o' the court.

SILVER CARSON is madder'n a hatter.

"Ha," he snorts, breathin' like he has the heaves, glarin' out'n the one eye which is still open, and combin' the sand

and such out of his whiskers. "Them jaspers tries to defy the majesty o' the law, does they? Proceed Knothole."

Elizabeth Sprowl is tryin' to bring Fiddlefoot back to the land o' the livin' —the feller is still stretched out peaceable. "Oh, you poor man," she says, throwin' water in his whiskers.

It don't take us gents no time to locate a crosscut saw, and, startin' at the peak o' the roof, we whittles a complete room off fer Fiddlefoot. Course it ain't got but three sides on her, and a winder is broke, but there is a prime bed inside —a swell layout.

Fiddlefoot rises to his pins and pulls out a quart bottle, but Knothole takes it away from him.

"Drink pretty, boys," he says, "we has a job o' work to do."

After we saws the room loose from Sprowl's house, we slides her easy on a couple timbers, hooks our broncs to her and tows her down grade to Fiddlefoot's waterhole. Time we gets her all set she looks fine. Fiddlefoot admires the thing with Elizabeth Sprowl oohin' and aahin' right along side o' him.

"It'll be durn near as good as my other shanty," he says, "time I gathers some boards to fix up one side and puts in the broke winder. Feller what figgers on settlin' down and gettin' hitched needs a snug roof, fer shore."

WE is lookin' sideways at these tremendous blushes what Elizabeth Sprowl puts on when we spots this Gumbo bunch comin' back at the high lope.

"Scatter men, and look to yore shootin' irons," warns Dobbs. "These rattlers look like they mean business this time."

But them fellers jest rides up and sets in their hulls, lookin' at us real disgusted-like. I is right proud to note that we has altered their appearance considerable, so to speak. Walt Riggs has a black eye that is a peach, while Rant Wilks appears to have rastled with a bobcat, face first. Mayor Tuttle is still wearin' the brim o' his Stetson around his neck—but he has a disturbin' and victorious look on his map. Cameron Sprowl is madder'n a rattler in July.

"You jackals!" he howls. "My house wasn't on this man, Banjofoot's land—we've just located the corner stones!"

"Not on his land?" echoes Silver Carson. "Why it must be—Fiddlefoot looked down the line hisself."

"Sure he did, sure he did," growls Tuttle, "and like all Sandstone mavericks, he is cross-eyed drunk."

We ain't got much fight left in us then, and we troops along to look over that line ourselves, feelin' plumb foolish. Mayor Carson is some stunned at first, but bein' a long-headed jasper he begins to figger out the delicate points o' law.

"What difference does it make?" he says. "Sprowl here owes Fiddlefoot a house, after burnin' his down, and refusin' to abide by the decision o' the court. He simple don't have to pay Fiddlefoot two bits fer the land."

"Two bits fer the land!" yells Sprowl, wavin' his arms agen. "I'll sue the county of Cannonball for all they've got, and every last soul in the crew that wrecked my house!"

Sprowl gets off his horse, plants his foot on the government survey stone and points to a flag they has set up on the t'other one a mile away.

"That," he says, "is the other marker. My house was in the clear."

"Lord love us," groans Mayor Carson. "What'll we do, boys?"

"Do?" yells Sprowl. "We'll go back to my room. We'll watch you smart boys drag it back and hitch it to my house. Meanwhile we'll do what this Gumbo Flats gentleman says a'fore—we'll telegraph this Violinfooted gent home."

"Where," he roars, looking around, "is he? Where is my sister?"

"Yore sister," says Curly Ransome, "was helping him lug lumber from yore place to board up that room with, the last time I seen her."

Sprowl lets a howl out of him that echoes from Prickly Pear canyon, claps home his spurs and takes off like his tail is afire. We all follers him at the dead run. Looks like Cannonball county is in a real dilemma, so to speak. Mayor Carson shore will be the laughin' stock o' the country. We is a heap sad.

Sprowl charges up to where Fiddlefoot and Elizabeth is workin' on the room and pinwheels to the ground. He rushes over and gives Fiddlefoot a hefty smack in the snoot what knocks him rollin'.

The long-legged, cross-eyed jasper gets to his pins and we kin see right away that he has sobered up considerable. He ain't goin' to be so easy took this time. He bores into Cameron Sprowl like a badger diggin' a hole in a blizzard.

I never did see such a howlin' free-fer-all battle since the time Dismal Jones whips Walt Riggs in the circus tent. These gents go to it like catamounts. One minute Sprowl is down and the next Fiddlefoot is weavin' to his feet. Elizabeth Sprowl is cheerin' Potter on.

"Give it to him, Pesky," she yells. "Pour it on him, Permanent!"

Sprowl turns his head to beller at her and Fiddlefoot uses the plumb rare opportunity to wallop the gent in the eye, kick his pins out from under him and set on his brisket. He grabs his whiskers and begins to pound his head up and down on the sod.

"Burn my shack down, will you, you slab-sided shidepoke," he growls, jest as Sprowl's whiskers pulls plumb off in his hands.

Fiddlefoot leaps to his feet, holdin' them whiskers in his hands while Sprowl backs off, scared lookin'.

"Well, I'll be a short-horned heifer," declares Potter, lookin' from Sprowl to them hairy ornaments.

"A gent kin wear false whiskers iff'n he wants to," says Sprowl. "They ain't no law agen it."

"False whiskers," says Fiddlefoot, a crafty look comin' in his eyes, "is wore by gents what has their pictures stuck up all over the state o' Texas. I don't want to hear no more out'a you, Sprowl. I needs some more lumber to finish up this shack. Get to luggin' it, mister, before I has to send word to Texas after some."

You never seed such a change come over a feller in yore life. Sprowl never says a word—he jest marches up to his place, grabs a armload o' boards and starts luggin' 'em down. We all sets there with our mouths open—speechless.

We shore did have a whale of a time at the shivaree we throws after Fiddlefoot and the Sprowl heifer gets married up. Some ory-eyed rannie gets careless and blows the corner off their shack with a sawed-off shotgun. Potter tells me it don't make no never mind. He says his brother-in-law will be plumb delighted to fetch down some lumber and fix it up fer him.

"How come," I inquires, "that Sprowl wears them false whiskers? He was up here long enough to grow a set of his own."

"Well," says Fiddlefoot, real cautious like, "I dunno fer shore, but I knowed of a gent down Texas way what couldn't grow none o' his own. Folks called him Smoothfaced Harry. Looked a heap like my brother-in-law, the feller did."

"Well, I declare," I says. "And ain't Sprowl mad about havin' his shack tore down and luggin' lumber fer you and Elizabeth?"

"Why should he be?" says Fiddlefoot, grinnin' at me. "That gent has had plenty o' experience along those lines, so to speak. He lugs all the cash out'n a Texas bank, and tears down a Texas jail fer shore."

"At least," says Fiddlefoot Potter, "that's what them posters says what I seen in Texas. Travel is shore broadenin'."

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SILVER CARSON ENTERTAINS

Another Story of Sandstone

By FRANCIS H. AMES

PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES!

PRONGHORNS are back

Antelopes are swift and wary, and they require a hunter with true patience—plus the right rifle!

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

THE pronghorn antelope is one of the smallest of North American big game animals. Bigger than a sheep and about the size of a small deer the average buck weighs a little under 120 pounds. But as a trophy head a prize pronghorn is almost up in a class with the lordly elk. And about as hard to bag.

What pronghorns lack in size they make up for in grace, beauty—and speed. Paced across open country by fast cars these jet-propelled phantoms of the western range have been clocked time and again doing 50 to 60 miles an hour. On short spurts they have hit 70.

When frightened or alarmed whole herds will hit a fifty-mile-an-hour clip on level or rolling prairie ground, their favorite habitat. An apparently easy gait for pronghorns making a three-to-four-mile run is about 30 miles an hour.

That's faster than the law says a man should drive a car in city streets, or most suburban areas. It makes the pronghorn perhaps the fastest of all animals. Certainly the fastest in North America.

It also makes him hard to bring down under fair hunting conditions. And hard to hit once you do get a buck inside your gunsights, usually at long range—400 yards or better, seldom under 200.

To bring down a big game animal as fast, alert and skittish as a pronghorn takes a fast gun, and fast, accurate marksmanship. Trying for a pronghorn antelope is no target practice proposition.

Courtesy U.S. Forest Service

Closeup of buck and doe antelope, Custer National Forest, Montana

Big game rifles that will do for such wild animals as deer or bear and firing

Courtesy Winchester Repeating Arms Co.

Winchester bolt action Model 70. A six-shot repeater in the .270 Win. caliber, and fast enough for pronghorns.

cartridges in the 2,000-foot-per-second initial velocity class are no dice for antelope. Not if you want a real antelope gun. Neither are the high speed .22 caliber "varmint" rifles. The bigger guns are too slow. The .22 varminters are fast enough but the .22 bullet is too light for sure and adequate penetration on an animal the size of a pronghorn buck.

The Best-Suited Gun

The gun best suited for the job is one chambered for cartridges in the 3,000-foot-per-second class, and big enough to push an 87 or 100 grain bullet out of the muzzle at that speed.

An excellent rifle of this type, the Model 70, is put out by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. It is a bolt action, six-shot repeater in the .270 caliber. Using a 100 grain bullet, the Winchester .270 cartridge has a rated muzzle velocity of 3,540 feet per second plus plenty of stopping power for an animal such as the pronghorn.

Guns chambered for the .257 Roberts or the .250-3000 Savage, both using an 87-grain bullet are also adequate rifles for bringing down a coveted pronghorn trophy head. Anything under the 87-grain bullet is apt to be too light.

Pronghorns incidentally have a tremendous reserve of vitality for animals of their size. Bucks shot squarely through the heart have been known to take off in full flight for distance of half a mile to a mile, running all the while as steadily as if the shot had been a miss, before finally dropping dead in their tracks.

Because of this it is important that any pronghorn antelope hunter follow closely every action of any animal he has fired at. Some hard-to-understand "misses" may prove to have been direct hits after all, if this policy is carefully adhered to. And no possible trophy head will be wasted.

Shooting indiscriminately at running pronghorns is poor sportsmanship. A distant target quartering away at the speed of alarmed antelopes is pretty much a hit or miss proposition at best. If a hit is scored an animal only wounded is likely to be the result. Even a direct hit in a vital area under such conditions will generally have to be credited to a certain amount of luck.

In the western States that, thanks to increasing herds, have reopened hunting seasons on antelope (generally under special license requirements) shooting from cars, or trying to catch up with a bounding bunch of pronghorns by bouncing over the country in a galloping jeep is also out—definitely. It doesn't give the animals a fair shake. Besides while racing after antelope in a jeep is exciting, it can be more dangerous to the hunter than to his quarry—particularly in uneven country. Spilled jeeps and loaded guns make for tragic accidents.

The best bet is a stalk, once a herd has been sighted, and an attempt to get as close as a 200-yard shot at a standing buck, without alarming the sensitive spring-bound speedster into high gear flight. This is often a far from easy task. From the standpoint of hunting skill, it is likely to afford a thorough test of any sportsman's prowess.

If the antelope bunch is alarmed—and sometimes these capricious creatures will become fretful for no apparent reason—they are likely to scatter in all directions like so many streaks of greased lightning. Once they do, it will generally be a long time and 4 or 5 miles further on before they settle down and gradually band together again.

Stalking a lone buck is a similar proposition. Yet it often pays off for those in search of a really fine trophy head. The best trophy animals are, naturally, the bigger, older bucks. And they seem to be more solitary in their habits, going about their own business and keeping away from the younger herds except during or just before the rutting season.

The neck shot, just behind the ears or slightly lower down, is usually preferred for antelope. However, if you are planning on a trophy head for later mounting neck shots must be carefully placed so as not to spoil the mount. Head or brain shots come next, if you can get them. Accurate heart shots are about as good. Third place is given to the backbone area along the spine about where the animal's neck and body join.

And here's a tip too many antelope hunters overlook. If that pronghorn head is to adorn your den as a mounted big-game trophy, be sure that plenty of cape, or neck skin, is removed with the head. Your taxidermist will bless you for taking this precaution. And it will enable him to do a better job when he

mounts the head. Too little neck skin and too short a cape can ruin a good trophy, making it impossible to give the mounted head its proper beauty.

The pronghorn antelope's range is and apparently always has been almost exclusively the western half of continental United States. Only a few have been found north of the Canadian border. Among southwestern varieties there has been some overlapping down into northern and north central Mexico. Even so he is essentially a western U.S. big game animal.

Name Is Misleading

The name — Pronghorn Antelope — first given him in accounts of the earliest western settlers is strictly a phoney. Cha-oo, the western Indians called him because of the peculiar blowing sound he makes when angry—or frightened. In reality the Pronghorn is not a true antelope at all. He is an all-American lone ranger in the animal world belonging to an entirely separate animal family—the *Antilocapridae,* if you want to get really technical.

What's more so far as is known he is the sole living representative of this particular animal group. He is a native to North America, with no distant kith or kin elsewhere on other continents.

Pronghorns have another peculiarity that has often been, and still is among old-timers, the subject of many a campfire or hot stove controversy. Do or don't they shed their horns annually like other hollow-horn mammals? The answer is Yes, and No—with an explanation.

Pronghorns differ radically from other hollow-horn animals in this respect. They possess horn cores that are *permanent.* This accounts for the fact that adult males are never seen without some kind of horn.

On the other hand, the graceful "pronghorn" racks are actually merely an outer sheath over the permanent horn. These sheaths with their prongs are shed annually in the fall, generally in October or November. By January the new sheath, starting as a growth of long hair on the permanent core begins to make its appearance. During its early stages the new 'rack' is soft and rubbery. By July the pronghorn's characteristic pronged horns are out in all their glory—firm and solid.

That's no reason why antelope seasons, when they are held, generally open early. Last year Idaho had a 3 day open season, by special permit from Sept. 11th to Sept. 13th. Montana's, also by special permit, lasted longer. It was from Sept. 26th to Dec. 12th, and for designated areas only. Wyoming too permitted antelope hunting in designated sections and by special license from Sept. 8th to Nov. 7th.

That seems to be the general pattern. But some wildlife authorities and conservationists, stressing the fact that for trophy purposes horns are in best condition before the rutting season when the bucks begin to fight over the does, have suggested a trophy season for pronghorn bucks only in late summer—say the last two weeks in August.

Aside from or perhaps because of its speed the pronghorn even in the early days has always been an elusive animal. Like the buffalo they were primarily range grazers. Perhaps at one time 40 million of them ranged the West, particularly the prairie and plains country east as far as Nebraska.

Pronghorns Are Timid

But unlike the heavier and much more cumbersome buffalo, due to their innate skittishness, pronghorns spook easily for any reason or no reason at all. The speed with which they could disappear from where they were to where they were going, made antelope generally considered an undependable source of food.

Unless the Indians could run them off a cliff, or surround them at a water hole they had little chance of bringing them down with bows and arrows. The trappers and explorers didn't have the time, and often lacked the patience, for a prolonged antelope stalk. Moreover carcass for carcass there is only a small amount of dressed table meat to be obtained from a pronghorn—about 30 pounds from an average buck. And for tanning purposes the hide is virtually worthless.

Sure, I know a lot of you WEST readers have probably read about Indians wearing antelope shirts, and jackets. But the chances are such garments were more or less ceremonial, supposed to have big medicine qualities that made the wearer speedy as a pronghorn or some such connotation.

The fact is that pronghorn leather is

porous, unevenly pliable and of little real utility.

It was not the early day hunter but the inevitable settling of the plains and prairies of the West that caused the rapid depletion of the former herds, and forced the remaining bands of antelope to seek refuge in continually more distant and less favorable places, both from the standpoint of terrain and forage available. Before that they were simply wild animals competing with stock-raisers, farmers and sheep men on some of the richest pasture sections of the public domain.

Even fences didn't, and still won't stop the fast and wary little creatures. For the good grass beyond it, antelope will crawl under a loose wire fence slick as a whistle. They don't try to jump it, or, as clumsier animals will do, bang against it. They simply belly down and slip in neat as a ballplayer making a fast slide for third base.

The pronghorns that persisted in the practice had to go. Farmers said it was in self-defense to save their crops. Cattlemen found the indefatigable foragers eating grass that would fatten livestock for market.

Later modern rifles, more hunters, indiscriminate hunting of bucks and does alike, and few really enforceable game laws in the western states took a still heavier toll. In company with other once abundant North American big game animals, pronghorns neared extinction.

By 1913 hunting antelope, even in favored country, had become more an exercise in endurance than anything else. It involved a lot of hard riding, a lot of stalking. But it seldom brought the hunter within range of a pronghorn.

Laws Save Antelopes

About that time big game protective measures began coming to the fore, for the hunter's own ultimate good, clear across the country. Restoration of the pronghorn was an important part of the program. The start was often meager. Oregon, for instance, started in with a herd of ten pronghorn antelopes.

Rebuilding was a slow process. Even protected animals had to contend with natural hazards. And occasional poaching or illegal killing. In the case of Oregon the rebuilding process was slow. Gradually it gained momentum. It wasn't until 1925 that the protected herds began to increase with real rapidity, and at a fairly stable rate.

But under wildlife management the pronghorns did come back. There is no doubt about it. By 1938 Oregon decided on an open season for pronghorns once more. The idea was to allow sportsmen and hunters a chance to harvest the growing surplus of pronghorn stock.

What happened? After 25 years of complete protection the pronghorns seemed to have been lulled into false security. Their sense of danger, their quickness to take flight at any alarm had been dulled. As far as a real big game hunt goes, the thing was like shooting fish in a barrel. And at least as far as this writer is concerned a trophy gained on such hunt is no trophy at all. You might as well buy a head already stuffed and mounted, and killed by someone else. There are no fond memories, no fireside stories to tell of the chase.

At any rate it didn't take the pronghorns long to catch on. They were a lot warier by the time 1939 rolled around. And that year Oregon instituted a new restriction. Hunters were prohibited from shooting from cars, or from within 150 feet of their cars.

The idea was to keep hunters from actually racing with the animals to get them within range, and then shooting while the pronghorns were still running. This practice had accounted for most of the cripple shots of 1938. It is also poor practice from another angle. A suddenly shot running buck is apt to damage his horns seriously in a quick cut down. And there goes your trophy as far as a prize pronghorn head is concerned.

Basically except for a change in places and a slight change in dates, the same thing happened in other western pronghorn states. But in time things simmered down. There is little doubt about the fact that the pronghorn as a big game objective is coming back to many of his former haunts in the West's back country big game hunting country. In fact under astute wildlife management long range programs he is already back in many places in safely huntable quantities. Safe for the assured continuation of the antelope, that is.

Rules and regulations for hunting the pronghorn are gradually being stabilized. As yet of course the allowable take must be carefully restricted to the so-called surplus of that particular region.

So long as this is done, but only so long as it is done, there is a whale of a good chance that in future years your son or my son will have better pronghorn hunting in the West than his daddy did. And that the American heritage of big game hunting as a sport can still be handed down from generation unto coming generation. That in itself will be well worth the lean years, and all the effort, thought, time and money spent on wildlife preservation and restoration by wildlife authorities and outside groups devoted to wildlife conservation.

Incidentally before we step off our temporary soapbox we would like to add that the above applies not only to pronghorns, or other big game animals but also, generally speaking, to game birds, and all the various forms of sport fishing so many millions of Americans enjoy.

Now let's get back to the pronghorn. He is a comparatively little fellow as far as big game animals go. But his eyes are as large as those of a horse. They are, in fact, one of his greatest protective aids. Little escapes those big bulging round eyes that can spot moving objects as far as 3 to 4 miles away. You and I would need a telescope to see a lone coyote slinking through desert sagebrush at that distance. The pronghorn can pick him out and watch him plain as day. It is an old habit with the antelope because coyotes are perhaps his greatest natural enemy.

Those big eyes too, on which he seems to rely incessantly, make stalking an antelope a job for a real hunter. One untoward sight of a careless stalker and this always elusive animal is off with all the speed at his command, literally gone with the wind.

Some old-timers claim that pronghorns are like flies, that they can actually see behind them. It is almost true. Because of the way their eyes are set in orbits that protrude from the skull, they have an extraordinarily large range of vision. And the instant any movement, even partly behind them, is caught they can quickly turn their big eyes and focus them on that particular object, in a manner that seems uncanny to us.

The pronghorn's sense of scent too is very acute, though he seems to depend primarily on eyesight and speed for safety and protection. In general appearance he is a graceful, slender creature, a buff or cinnamon color with brightly contrasting black and white markings on his head and neck. There is also a prominent rump patch of white which the pronghorns appear to flash on and off at will, like turning a light on or out, as a danger signal when anything alarms them.

Odd-Looking Horns

The horns of the mature buck pronghorn antelope are peculiarly his own. They are flat, anywhere from 14 to 20 inches long (measured along the outside curve), rise erect above the head and have recurved tips. Each horn has a single, flat, forward protruding prong.

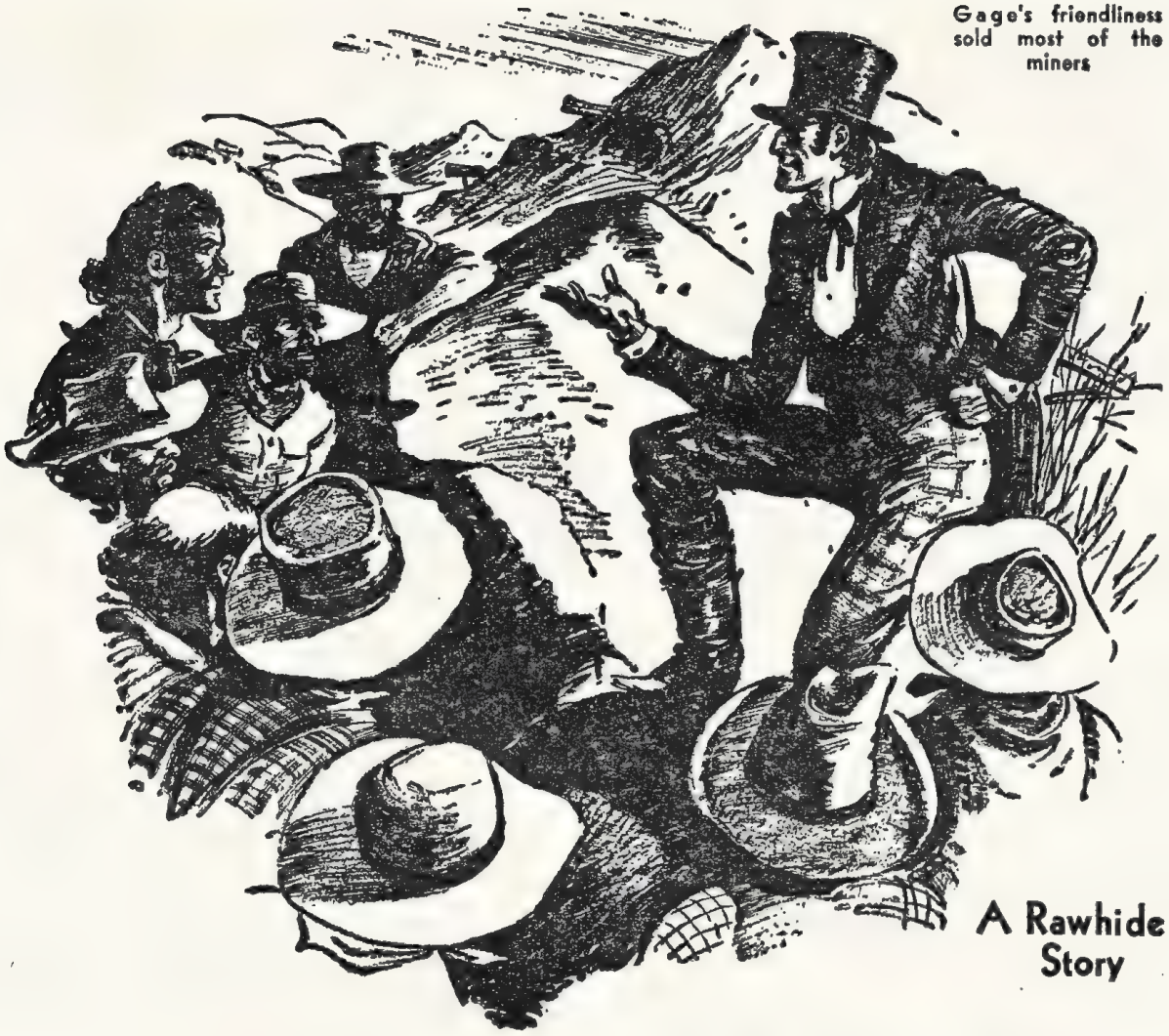
Hard as they are to stalk—and they are still harder to hit cleanly when in flight—the pronghorn has one definite characteristic that gives the hunter a break. That is his insatiable curiosity.

In antelope country if you are trailing a buck or scattered small herd and yet can't seem to get within a half mile or so of your quarry try, providing the terrain permits it, this simple experiment. Hang a piece of white cloth (handkerchief will do) on some isolated bush or a stick where it will wave in the wind. Then find yourself some not too close place of absolute concealment, and settle down to wait awhile.

The trick won't always work. But more often than not after a time Mr. Pronghorn will spot the cloth and get curious. He won't come dashing right up to it. The chances are he will make some feints at it, running towards it, stopping, staring at it, then retreating part way back to his original position again, each feint bringing him closer to the object of his curiosity. Eventually you will generally be able to get him standing, staring within accurate range of your gun.

Take a steady knee position, it's better than standing upright and besides it keeps your knees from shaking, line him up in your sights, squeeze off the shot, and if all goes well you've bagged your trophy.

It is a downwind jog of course, so that no man-scent will reach the pronghorn's sensitive nostrils. It won't work in country where a lot of other hunters are around, and banging away. But it is an old-time Western hunters' stunt that in its day brought down many a pronghorn antelope, just for table meat and a little variety in the campfire fare.



A Rawhide Story

SWINDLE SIXES

by TOM PARSONS

THERE was seldom a time when the Rawhide diggings, known as Dog Leg, hadn't seen prospective buyers for the claims along the creek.

Men would wander into the diggings, make inquiries as to prices, watch the workings and even prospect further up and down the creek themselves. Sometimes they bought out a claim, but not often, since the paydirt was good and the owners reluctant to part with the crude mines. Sometimes these strangers would stake out claims of their own away from the main diggings and gradually themselves become a part of the rough community along the creek.

So the three strangers that had appeared some months before had created

Johnny Tex talks the Dog Leg miners into selling their claims to Gold Bond Gage—and then finds himself way out on a limb!

no great stir of interest. They asked shrewd questions, they watched the work with keen-eyed intentness, they made sharp inquiries about assay reports. Then they disappeared, saying nothing, making no offers to buy any of the mines nor any effort to stake claims on their own. Dog Leg forgot them.

Then the whisper started, and no one knew its source. A big gold mining company had become interested in Dog Leg. The three strangers had been scouts sent to make a report. The talk buzzed and grew in volume. There were wild guesses. If anyone knew definitely what was afoot, it was Paul Pace of the Rawhide bank. But he evaded all the question he could, neither confirming nor denying the rumors that flew thick and fast.

Two months passed and gradually the whispers died down. It was just another exploded dream that the Dog Leg mines would ever become important diggings.

ON a bright Saturday morning Johnny Tex and his partner, Plug Kelly, saddled up and rode into Rawhide for their weekly supplies and a few hours release from the grinding labor of digging gold.

The stage from Pinto pulled into town just a few minutes before Johnny and Plug drew rein before the bank. They carried their pokes in to Paul Pace, who weighed the gold and gave them a receipt for it.

"Heard any more about that mining company?" Johnny asked. Pace looked up at the tall young man with the eager, brown eyes. He shook his head.

"Never did have word, Johnny. You listened to too much talk up in the diggings."

Johnny made an impatient, angry gesture. "All that talk meant something, Paul. They'd better move before some other outfit walks in with a good offer."

"Now Johnny, me lad," Plug Kelly said in his quiet voice. "Would ye be breaking up a fine thing we have between us? Sure, and I've found do ye wait long enough, ye have what ye want —but 'tis a good partnership we've had these years."

"We'll still have it, Plug, when we buy that ranch."

"I'll tell Tiny Tucker," Pace chuckled.

Johnny frowned and his mobile lips set in a harsh line for a second.

"No use to stir Tiny up until we've sold our mine. Right now it looks like we'll be too blamed old to punch cows by the time that company gets around to buying."

Paul opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and his lips snapped shut. Neither Johnny nor Plug had missed the by-play. They glanced swiftly at one another but said nothing, leaving the bank together. Out on the plank sidewalk, Johnny touched Plug's arm.

"Yuh saw it? Paul was about to tell us something. Plug, that just wasn't all wild talk."

Plug rubbed his hard jaw and his calm blue eyes looked up toward the high War Bonnet peaks. He was shorter than Johnny, perhaps fifteen years older. He had a square face, as placid as the hills themselves, and a quiet humor lurked in his full lips.

"It would sound that way, Johnny." He chuckled. "But we can wait some more, I'm thinking. I'll buy the supplies from Lem Adams. Do ye step over to the New Deck and have me drink waiting for me."

He cut sharp to the right and disappeared into the General Store. Johnny stood indecisively a moment near the hitchrack. There were still some loafers who had watched the stage come in and leave. At last he shrugged his wide shoulders and strode over to the New Deck.

There were only three people in the place. Whiskery Bill shuffled around at his swamping job. Dent Sturgis stood behind the bar talking to a well-dressed stranger. The saloon keeper looked up when Johnny entered.

"Here's a gent wants to meet a miner. Mr. Gage, shake hands with Johnny Tex. Him and Plug Kelly have one of the good claims up on Dog Leg."

Gage turned and extended his hand. He was as tall as Johnny. He looked to be in his mid-forties. He had a long, lean face and a high forehead. His sandy hair had been carefully slicked down to cover a potential bald spot. His blue eyes were guileless and open, his thin, wide lips parted in a friendly smile. He wore excellent clothes of a conservative cut, the gleaming white of his shirt broken by the black string tie.

"I am surprised, sir," he said. "Miners are, as a rule, very coarse and a bit

crude. But you—ah—look like an upright, intelligent young man."

Johnny flushed and felt a warm, pleasant glow suffuse his face. He looked embarrassed. Dent Sturgis automatically wiped the top of the bar.

"Gage is asking questions about Dog Leg and a chance to buy a mine up there. I didn't know much about it but I told him one of you boys would be in."

"A drink for Mr. Tex," Gage said. "A gesture of friendship before business—ah—I always say. Perhaps we could sit at one of those tables over there and have our discussion."

"Yuh buying a mine?" Johnny asked. Gage's sandy brow arched upward and he placed his finger alongside his nose.

"That, in a way, is correct, sir. Let us say—ah—several mines interest me, knowing I can trust you to keep absolute silence about it. I know I can. To your health, Mr. Tex."

HE downed the drink with a courteous gesture to Johnny. His eyes swept over the bottles back of the bar and he selected one, the most expensive brand that Dent carried. He led the way to the table and sat down.

"Now, Mr. Tex, I believe we can do business. I am known far and wide as Gold Bond Gage because of the fair and—ah—honest method in which I do business and because my spoken word is as good and sound as a U.S. Treasury bond. Now if your mine—"

"Would yuh wait," Johnny asked, "until Plug comes in? He's my partner and—"

"Of course!" Gage made an expansive gesture with his hand. He leaned forward, and his voice lowered. "Can your estimable partner keep—ah—his mouth shut?"

"Plug's like a bear trap," Johnny grinned.

Gage was satisfied. While they waited for Plug, Gage spoke of several profitable mining deals he had consummated over the west. He gave the impression that he represented a wealthy corporation with holdings all over the world, though he never identified it by name. He asked questions about Rawhide, the diggings, possible sites for a crusher and smelter. He suggested that the town itself was a pleasant place for the many workers the company would bring in. Johnny listened, warmed by the good whisky and the increasingly roseate hue of his thoughts.

Plug came and Johnny introduced him to Gage. Plug shook hands and sat down, listening impassively to Gage's smooth, swift talk. At last Gold Bond lowered his voice, first glancing toward the bar.

"I may not reveal the source of my information, but I know the potential wealth of Dog Leg, gentlemen. My company is interested in buying up the holdings and developing them on a larger scale."

"The scouts!" Johnny breathed. Gage looked sharply at him and then smiled slowly, spreading his hands palm upward on the table.

"You *are* very quick and alert, Mr. Tex. Be that as it may, I wish to consummate this deal as—ah—swiftly and efficiently as possible. For that reason, I have a plan in mind. It would take far too much time to dicker with each and every miner, too many contracts at different terms."

"Sure and it's the way that's clean-cut and square to each," Plug put in. A shadow of a frown chased over Gold Bond's high forehead and was gone.

"This is equally square, sir. Now an intelligent and popular young man like Mr. Tex, or yourself, Mr. Kelly, could form an association of all the miners."

"Ye'd have a hand in it?" Plug asked.

"Not at all. Each member could evaluate his mine and assign it to the association. Then, the price being right according to the survey I have, I could issue an option to buy to the association. One contract, one payment all clear and above board."

"Sounds good," Johnny nodded. He grinned at Plug. "Looks like that ranch ain't far off."

"And why," Plug demanded, disregarding Johnny, "should ye issue an option? Ye could buy outright."

"I am only a representative," Gage said with a resigned smile. "I have authority to give one thousand dollars as earnest money for a sixty day option. This gives the company a chance to review the contract terms. They will then pay in full—and promptly. If they do not, then the association will have the thousand dollars for its trouble and expenses. That is—ah—fair, I should say."

Plug sat back and frowned across the table at Gold Bond Gage. Johnny shifted nervously and edged forward in his

chair. He felt impatient and irritable toward Plug that he should hesitate so long. The whole deal seemed open and above-board, one that could be quickly consummated to the ultimate profit of everyone.

"How soon," he asked, "would you be ready to buy the mines?"

"This instant!" Gage exclaimed. "I'd give you the option and the money right now if your association was formed."

"How about it, Plug?" Johnny asked. Plug cleared his throat and slowly came to his feet. He shook his head, a stubborn look in his eyes.

"That I'll not be saying, me lad. 'Tis best first to know who ye deal with and—"

"My word's as good as a gold bond!" Gage exclaimed.

"Ye talk too much for the worth of ye," Plug said quietly. " 'Tis that that worries me. Johnny, I'd talk with ye outside." He left the table so abruptly that Gage had no chance to remonstrate.

JOHNNY flushed and his fists doubled. He made a swift apology to Gage and followed his partner out the swing doors. He tried to stop Plug on the saloon porch but the Irishman plodded doggedly ahead until they were across the street. Then Plug spoke gently.

"Ye jump too quick at a dangling bait, Johnny."

"And you're blasted insulting to a gent who plans to buy all the Dog Leg mines at a good price!"

"Good price is it now! I heard no mention but a thousand dollars on an option. Sure, and I've niver heard of that before. The dinero in me hands, bucko-lad, or I ask some questions about the likes of him and his company. By the way, he did not name the company."

"He's cautious," Johnny said impatiently. "Look, Plug, this is our chance. We got to take it."

"Not me. That smiling face has a black heart, ye'll see."

Johnny's anger exploded. "Plug, you're a stubborn old Irishman and yuh haven't the sense to see a good deal when it comes along!"

Plug's face turned red and his eyes grew cold. His big fists clenched and then he slowly opened his fingers. He shoved his hands deep in his pockets.

"I've mashed the face of them that has called me less, Johnny. Deal with the spalpeen if ye like, but count me out. I'll stand by to pick up what's left when he gets through with ye. Good-day, and bad cess to your addled brains."

He turned on his heel and stalked off to the bank. Johnny watched him go, checking an impulse to go after Plug and beat some sense into the stubborn old square head. The mining company had sent scouts months ago, and now Gage was here to buy out the claims. It probably would never happen again and Plug Kelly had insulted the man with the money.

Johnny swore under his breath. At least he could recognize opportunity and be ready to take advantage of it. If Plug would not make a move, Johnny would. He turned and walked back inside the New Deck where Gage waited at the table.

"Yuh'll excuse Plug," Johnny said. "Sometimes he gets all mixed up and stubborn. I reckon I can bring him around once this association is formed."

"I'm sure you can," Gage smiled. "I hoped you would organize and head the association, Mr. Tex. I like to—ah—deal with a young man as quick and bright as you. Now, if I can make a few suggestions—"

Johnny left the New Deck an hour later, his head whirling with organization plans. Gage had hinted that the price to be paid for the mines would be very high. It was confidential, of course, but he liked Johnny and knew he'd keep secrets. The big mines had seriously lost productivity and there was a mad scramble to acquire new fields among the mining companies.

Plug was in the General Store when Johnny found him. He turned from Lem Adams and searched Johnny's face as his partner came up. Plug's eyes shadowed when he saw the quick, excited way in which Johnny walked, the trace of anger still in him. Plug said nothing until the two of them were outside, mounted and riding out of town. Only then did Plug gently ask his question.

"And what would ye be doing Johnny?"

"Organizing the miners' association, like Gage suggested," Johnny snapped. He twisted around in his saddle. "Plug, why can't yuh work with me? We'll sell at a good profit and have that big ranch we've always dreamed about."

"That I'd do in a minute, Johnny, was

I sure of Mister Gold Bond Gage. I've been talking to Paul Pace—"

"This was to be secret for a while—!" Johnny started but Plug held up his hand.

"Wsst! and it was no secrets I told. Paul answered me questions and that was all. Mining scouts were here, Johnny, that Paul finally admitted. But he has never seen a buyer from the syndicate, nor had he ever heard of the likes of Gage."

"A cowtown and mining village banker!" Johnny openly jibed.

" 'Twould be through the bank the company would deal," Plug said. "There has been no word, no letter, no deposit of funds. 'Tis certain I am that Gage is a blackguard and the back of me hand to him. I've seen his like before."

Johnny straightened and the set of his shoulders told Plug that the youngster was determined to carry through Gold Bond's proposal. Plug's own jaw set at a stubborn angle. He could not only fight this association, but he could also refuse to sell his half of the mine.

THE next week was a strained one. Johnny plunged into the organizing job on Dog Leg, eager to bring the deal to a head. His enthusiasm was infectious and he painted a glowing picture of the profits to be made from the sale. Gold Bond Gage came three times to the diggings. His easy friendliness and smooth flattery sold most of the miners on the deal. Plug Kelly and a few older heads urged caution but they made no headway.

Plug tried to remain the same easy-going partner to Johnny that he had been before the coming of Gold Bond. He tried to make clear that his opposition centered on Gold Bond and the proposed option deal, that otherwise there was nothing between them. Johnny Tex wouldn't have it that way. He considered Plug's resistance as a personal slur on his own business ability. He became more distant and cold, his temper flashed more often. Plug kept a tight hold on his own temper, though there were times when he felt he ought to take a birch switch to the seat of Johnny's trousers.

At last Johnny had welded the miners into an association. Only four or five held out. He called a meeting at which Gold Bond would present his option contract and so take the first step in the sale of the Dog Leg Diggings. Plug Kelly slipped out of the camp early in the afternoon and Johnny breathed a sigh of relief. He had feared Plug's caustic Irish tongue.

Johnny called the meeting to order and it progressed satisfactorily. The miners were eager to sell and Gold Bond seemed just as eager to buy. Johnny and two other men, empowered by the miners to act for them, signed the option over Gold Bond's flourished signature. Then Gage paid the thousand dollars, all in crisp new ten dollar bills. The miners' eyes gleamed when they saw the pile of yellow certificates.

"I shall go east immediately," Gage said, holding aloft the option. "My company will immediately review the sale price asked for your claims. They are all very fair and reasonable and I know the company will close the deal. That little pile of bank notes will be nothing compared to what I'll bring back with me."

"When can we expect yuh?" Johnny asked. Gage tugged thoughtfully at his ear.

"Well within the option period," he said. "My company does not want to lose out on Dog Leg."

Gold Bond left soon after the signing of the contract but the miners remained, most of them boasting about the high price they had asked for their claims. They pounded Johnny on the back and called him a smart business man. Then the door opened and Plug Kelly came in, Paul Pace just behind him. Plug pulled up short, sensing that the meeting was over.

"It's done, Plug," Johnny said with a note of triumph in his voice, "and yore augering is over. Here's the option and there's the money."

"Too bad," Pace said softly. Johnny looked sharply at him.

"Why? It's a good offer."

"Johnny me lad," Plug said slowly, "I tried to get ye to slow down and wait but listen ye would not. The afternoon stage brought in two buyers from the Atlas Gold Company, the very ones that sent the scouts. They are ready to buy the claims and pay spot cash in full right into the eager palm of yez all."

"Full cash?" a miner demanded. Plug nodded and pulled out a contract.

"They had the papers all drawn. Here's the one for the mine Johnny and

I own. No waiting, the gentlemen said. Here's the contract and a pen, there's the cash when ye sign."

There was a deep silence in the room. Johnny looked down at the option Gold Bond had given him and then at the table where the ten dollar notes lay stacked. He grinned, a touch ruefully, and shrugged.

"Well, I reckon it will all work out. We wait sixty days for our dinero, but we can take a heap of ore from the mines in that time."

"That would be right," Plug said, "but Paul here has tried to find out about Mister Gage. No one knows the spalpeen."

"I have ideas," Pace said grimly, "and I'm writing to some banks back east. I'll let you know."

Johnny swallowed, feeling the eyes of the miners on him. He looked down at the option and Gage's bold, black scrawl at its bottom. He felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach but he fought it down. The stack of gold notes on the table brought back his confidence.

"Yuh'll find he's all right, Pace," he said firmly. "I'll back that to you and my friends. If he ain't—I reckon I'll know what to do."

The men from the Atlas Mining Company did not remain long in Rawhide. They could get four or five of the claims but these were not enough to justify the equipment needed to work the diggings on a big commercial scale. Gage's option legally held the miners for the life of the contract. The Atlas men left, promising to return in sixty days if Gage did not act.

"That's not a full promise," one of them told Plug Kelly. "Atlas might find another diggings and develop it. If the Company does that, then it won't be interested in Rawhide for maybe years to come. Too bad you went and tied yourselves up."

FOR a time the whole district talked of the events at Dog Leg and even the townsfolk guessed at the probable outcome of Johnny's efforts. The miners themselves were uncertain, afraid they had moved too fast in giving Gold Bond the exclusive right to buy up the claims. As the days turned into weeks they recalled more and more longingly the outright sale that Atlas had offered.

Even Johnny felt more and more uncertain, though he never admitted it in so many words to Plug. He looked more worried as the weeks passed. His work suffered and he had a badly frayed temper. The Saturday of the second week, he refused to ride into Rawhide with Plug.

"Sure and it'll do ye good to forget the mine," Plug insisted. "A drink at the New Deck and a good session at poker and ye'll be all the better."

"No." Johnny shook his head, jaw set. "I'll stick here. They're starting to hooraw me too much about Gage and I'm ready to fight."

"Ye worry too much about it, me lad. If Gage is honest, ye have nothing to lose. If he's black-hearted, as I think, then ye can always turn to Atlas."

"If they ain't already bought somewhere else," Johnny said bitterly. "You get the supplies, Plug. I'll stay here and work."

Plug returned late that night and Johnny was already in his bunk. Plug lit the lamp and shook Johnny awake. Something in the set of Plug's jaw, the shadows in his eyes made Johnny catch his breath.

"What is it, Plug?"

"It's Gold Bond Gage, bad cess to him! He's in Yerba and all the towns south of here, selling stock in a company that's only in the crooked brain of him. Paul Pace just got word from a bank in Texas that the spalpeen is the worst swindler west of the Mississippi. He was run out of Texas for selling worthless mining stock."

Johnny could only stare at his partner and Plug looked away, not wanting to see the misery in the young man's eyes. Plug licked his lips and looked down at his square, work-hardened hands.

"The bucko wanted that option to get a claim to the mines up here, Johnny. It's a worth a thousand dollars for him to tie ye up for sixty days. He's been selling stock in Dog Leg for three weeks now and in the five that's left, he'll make a fortune stealing other folks' money."

"But he has to—"

"Not at all," Plug interrupted. "'He'll forget the option and the thousand dollars. At a hundred a share, he'll make a hundred times that option money."

"Swindled!" Johnny exclaimed. He passed his hand over his eyes and then he looked up hopefully. "But in five

weeks, his hold is gone. We can sell to Atlas."

"There's more," Plug went on heavily. "Atlas Mining is looking at a place in the north part of the Territory. They'll be buying it unless Dog Leg can be sold in the next week or two. Sure and it's the devil's own place ye're in, Johnny. I wish I knew what ye could do!"

BOTH men were silent for long minutes. Johnny stared heavily at the far wall while Plug waited, a look of understanding and pity in his eyes. At last he gently touched Johnny's sleeve.

"Ye take it too hard, me bucko. Sure and every man is entitled to his mistakes now and then."

"But not when he tangles other gents in his own loop," Johnny snapped. "Plug, who knows about this yet on Dog Leg?"

"Well now there'd be just me. But by morning every man-jack along the creek will have heard of it. Rawhide's already full of talk."

"I'm riding to Yerba," Johnny said and threw back the blanket. "I'm taking the thousand dollars the boys left in my keeping and Gold Bond Gage is taking it back. He's tearing up that option—pronto."

"Had ye thought," Plug placed his hand on Johnny's chest, "that the imp of Satan won't be wanting to change the option? And what's to make him?"

"This," Johnny said grimly. He held up his fist. Plug sighed.

"Wsst! and I'll be riding with ye. Gage is likely to have himself protection against those he has swindled. Of course, later he'll be safe and his victims will be coming to Dog Leg with blood in their eyes."

"It's my job, Plug. I'm the one who wouldn't listen to reason because I was too blasted greedy for quick money. Yuh tell the boys where I've gone."

He pushed Plug to one side and started dressing. Plug hesitated then shrugged. Johnny would ride into trouble at Yerba, but Plug knew how he felt. A man should have a chance to redeem his mistakes. Plug saw that he would only interfere. At last Johnny had strapped on his gunbelt and made up his blanket-roll. He straightened, looked long and hard at Plug. He flushed and extended his hand.

"I've been a locoed fool, Plug. I've treated yuh blamed mean the last few weeks. Reckon yuh could—sort of forget it?"

"Me boy!" Plug laughed and took his partner's hand. "It was forgot the moment 'twas done or said. Git ye to riding and come back with the hide of the thievin' galoot. I'll look for ye."

"See if Pace can keep Atlas Mining interested for another week," Johnny said at the door. Plug nodded. His partner was gone.

It was close to midnight when Johnny rode through Rawhide. The town was dark and silent and only a single dog noted his passing in a series of shrill barks. Johnny squared his shoulders and faced the dark, long road south.

Late the next afternoon he rode into Yerba, in the next county. It was typical cowtown, though much larger than Rawhide, and a shipping point for all the ranches in the district. There were two hotels and at least four saloons faced on the long main street. Johnny pulled in to the hitchrack of one of the hotels and registered.

"Heard of a gent named Gage?" he asked the clerk.

The man's face instantly lighted.

"I sure have! He's been selling gold mine stock all over this country. Bought some myself. I'll show yuh!"

Johnny waited tight-lipped and weary while the clerk opened the hotel safe and pulled out a colorful stock certificate. Johnny read the big ornate letters in the scroll at the top, "Gage Gold and Promotion Company, Ltd." The clerk's certificate was for five shares. Johnny nodded coldly and returned the papers.

"Where is he now?"

"He's registered right here," the clerk said, "but he's visiting the spreads west of town. Won't be back until morning, I reckon. Yuh want to see him?"

"No," Johnny said cautiously. "Yuh think that stock's good?"

"Sure is! Backed by the Dog Leg diggings north of here. We've all heard about them. When a gent like Gage buys 'em lock, stock and barrel, yuh can bet he'll develop 'em."

Johnny picked up his key and went to his room. He was glad Gage was gone, for it gave him a chance to rest up after his long ride. He slept like a log the whole night through and in the morning was fresh and eager to meet Gold Bond

Gage. He had breakfast at a nearby cafe and then returned to the hotel. The clerk was eager and willing to give him the number of Gage's room.

It was to the front of the hotel on the second floor, overlooking the street, obviously the best in the house. Johnny adjusted his gun belt and knocked. The door instantly opened and a tall gun-hung man with squinty eyes looked at Johnny.

"I want to see Gage—about gold stock," Johnny answered the man's abrupt question. Gold Bond's voice came from within the room, suave and friendly as usual.

"Let him in, Breck! Let him in! I am always anxious to meet men of foresight and vision."

Breck stepped to one side and Johnny walked into the room. Gage stood at the window, his back to Johnny, apparently consulting a sheaf of notes in his hand. Johnny patiently waited while Gage went through the act of a harassed and busy man. He looked up finally, smiling. It slowly vanished when he saw Johnny. He licked his lips, then smiled again and extended his hand.

"Well, Mr. Tex! This is a surprise!" Johnny ignored the hand and turned so that he could keep a wary eye on the gunhawk, Breck. He pulled the thousand dollars and the option from his pocket.

"I brought these back to yuh, Gage. I reckon it's time yuh took back yore dirty money and tore up that option."

"Why?" Gage demanded sharply, then caught himself. "It's binding and in perfect order."

"For you," Johnny agreed. "Yuh lied to us on Dog Leg. Yuh never intended to buy them mines. Yuh just wanted to cheat honest folks out of their money. Then yuh'd run off and leave us miners to face the music."

GAGE glanced swiftly at Breck, who had now placed himself against the door, barring the way out of the room. His hand hung just above his holster, the fingers taloned.

"What I do," Gage said coldly, "is my own business. You can take that money back to your friends."

"It's a new deal, Gage," Johnny said quietly. "Yuh used a crooked brand in Texas and yuh're trying it here. I'm calling yore hand and we're going to the Yerba sheriff about this Dog Leg stock yuh're selling in mines yuh don't own. He'll sure be glad to know about it."

"Breck," Gage said quietly.

Instantly Breck's taloned hand plunged down. Johnny caught the motion from the corner of his eye and he threw himself to one side. He knew he had little chance against a professional gunslinger, yet he tried desperately to bring his own Colt into play before Breck's slugs cut him down.

His six was but half clear of leather when the slug caught Johnny high in the left shoulder. The slap of the bullet flung him half around and Breck's second shot missed by a whisper. Johnny still lifted his Colt, even as his left side seemed to go paralyzed. He caught himself against the wall and now his Colt was free.

Gage had thrown himself across the room, clear of the line of fire. The swindler's hand darted inside his dark coat and Johnny knew he reached for a hideout gun. But Breck was the immediate danger. The squinty eyes looked coldly through a haze of gunsmoke. His Colt spat flame a third time even as Johnny lined his six and fired.

Breck's face went slack as the bullet slapped into his chest. He hung motionless against the door, gun still levelled, his eyes glazing, mouth hanging open. Johnny had no time to watch him. Gage had freed the double-barrelled derringer and the first slug sang like a wasp past Johnny's ear.

Johnny wheeled and it seemed as though his movements were eternally slow. Gage's lips were drawn back over his teeth in a snarl and there was death in his slitted eyes. Johnny levelled his gun and felt the pressure of the trigger against his finger. The gun roared, bucked and he saw Gage falling. Then Johnny himself slumped to the floor, the world spinning into a black vortex.

Three days later, despite the protests of the Yerba doctor, Johnny took the stage to Rawhide. Plug Kelly and the miners met him, crowding around the stage as Johnny painfully descended. He sat down on the bench outside the station and caught his breath. Then he grinned up at the circle of faces.

"Yuh can sell the mines to Atlas," he said. "Gage and his hired gunhawk ain't got no more use for that option. His gunhawk's dead and Gage is healing up so he can serve a long, long term in jail for

his swindles. The Yerba sheriff recovered most of the stock money and returned it."

"Yuh did a good job, Johnny," one of the miners said.

"A blamed poor job," Johnny sobered. He looked at Plug. "From now on I'm listening first when a proposition comes along not jumping hog wild into it. Is it too late to get Atlas Mining back to Dog Leg again?"

"No," Plug answered. "We heard what ye did at Yerba and Paul Pace sent a telegram. The Atlas buyers will be here next week. Sure, and ye might be a stubborn mule at times, Johnny Tex, but I'm right proud of ye. It's few men that'll admit a mistake like you did, and fewer that'd straighten it up with a six against a professional gunslammer and a killing snake like Gold Bond Gage. I'll take yer hand—pardner!"

"ABIDE HERE, STRANGER...."

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

PERHAPS nowhere else in the world than in the West can a rover find a vacant building which he is welcome to use until he moves on again. Many an early pioneer and prospector, leaving for other parts, left a house behind him. Often the house became "public property." Anyone who wished could stop over for a night, a week, a month.

A code grew up about such places. The last occupant must leave the house in as good or better condition than he found it. Out of gratitude for its use travelers often left a bit of food in the cabin for others to use when they arrived tired and hungry. This food, according to the code, was always replaced and occasionally added to. Many a tumbledown shack contains enough canned goods to feed a dozen men for a week. Itinerants also left behind pots, dishes, silverware.

One of the most unusual of these places, of which there are possibly as many as 1000, is the Clive House, a little off the Lancaster-Victorville highway in Southern California.

Somewhere around 1900 Tom Clive and his wife arrived in this patch of the Mohave wastelands to claim a quarter-section homestead. Slowly they cleared off 40 acres of mesquite and cactus and put it to graze for beef and dairy cattle and their team of horses, and they built a three-room shack.

In 1911 Tom started blasting some of the rock from beneath the little house. He wanted a cellar in which to store things. The dynamite went off too soon and Tom Clive's wife was his widow.

Doggedly the Widow Clive stayed on, doing alone the things she and Tom had planned to do together. But it was too much for one woman. Nine years later, in 1920, her health broken, she moved away. But the house she left intact. On a small table, built from cracker boxes, she left the Bible. On either side of the Bible the widow Clive set a candle in a bottle.

On the walls she left her mottoes, truly fitting for a house which would become one of the many resting places of wanderers, "Abide here, stranger, and go thy way in peace," and "He who finds shelter here is both Guest and Friend." The Bible, itself, stands open at a circled paragraph that reads, "There is nothing in my house which they have not seen; nothing have they taken out; for the Lord abideth here."

Those mottoes have held true now for almost thirty years. Many are the strangers who have abided in the Widow Clive's home but none have touched anything. The ancient Bible lies exactly as the widow left it.

Her once barren shelves are now fully stocked with a wide array of canned foods. In the drawer of the counter along the stove rests sufficient silverwear to serve five. The widow left only enough for two. She left behind her two pots and one pan and one kettle; now there are half a dozen pots, as many pans, two coffee pots and three kettles.

Let there be PEACE

by Porter West

Salsoda Green wanted to hang up his guns, but it was no time to quit fighting when water rights war raged!

THE crackle of danger and death was in the air, ominously clear even to the inured ears of those who lived in Patagonia, Arizona, when the Wagon Wheel Saloon was new.

Five poker players watched the rough, ruthless rancher, Nick Blackburn, goading Ben Evans into suicidal gunplay. It was killing in the making, moving inexorably, for none seemed able to prevent it. They were blocked by the gun code of the West.

Slow rage seared Ben Evans' brain, robbed him of caution as he stood before Blackburn's insults. He forgot his young wife waiting outside for him in the buckboard—a young wife who would be a widow, for deep in Ben's heart he knew Blackburn was baiting him.

"I said yore father stole that spring,"

Blackburn repeated. "And he stole cows from me to start his spread."

Evans knew he was going to claw for his gun—and die trying to drive a bullet through Blackburn's lying lips. A man could stand only so much.

"Pardon, son," drawled a slow voice at Ben Evans' elbow. "Can yuh spare a match?"

Evans jerked his eyes in the direction of the voice, looked down at the little man who had slipped quietly from the poker table, and now edged between him and Blackburn, a cigarette dangling from solemn lips.

"Hate to bother yuh," the little man said, "but I hanker for a smoke."

Evans started to make an angry, impatient reply, but the small man's eyes held his gaze. They were a strange blue —a cold, glacial-ice blue. They seemed windows opening upon a soul in torment, windows set in a face that was wind-tanned but ageless.

As Evans opened his mouth to speak, Blackburn roared and sprang. His heavy hand grabbed the stranger's shoulder, jerked him violently.

"What yuh mean, bustin' in on things that ain't yore business?" Blackburn demanded.

THE mild little man recovered his balance, his long arms dangling at his sides, extraordinarily large hands brushing tan trousers where most men wore their guns. But he was unarmed.

"I never met yuh," he told Blackburn softly, "but my name's Green—'Salsoda' Green. And yore name?"

"Blackburn. Of the Bar B."

"Glad to know yuh," Salsoda Green told him, and turned his back as he moved softly toward Ben Evans. He held out his hand. "The match, son?"

One of the poker players laughed. Blackburn bellowed, lunged and grasped Salsoda by the shoulder. He glared into the face half-a-foot below his.

"Since yuh dress like a woman—without no gun so I can fight yuh like a man—I'm goin' to spank yuh!"

Salsoda sighed wearily. "All I ever wanted was a match, but if yuh don't let go of me right now, Mr. Blackburn, I'm going to stick my finger in yore eye." He held up the first finger on his left hand for Blackburn to see. "Like this," he added, and jabbed it into the bully's right eye.

Blackburn yelped, jumped back, and for an instant cupped his face in his hands. Then he glared his hate.

"Yuh dirty little—" He twisted the words through clenched teeth as he charged, his huge hands reaching out before him.

Salsoda ducked, sidestepped swiftly, and the heavy man roared past as a bull passes a skillful matador. Blackburn crashed against the bar, turned, a bleak smile grimacing his thick lips. He started a slow walk toward Salsoda. He had made a mistake by rushing, but now he would stalk his victim into a corner. Batter his face into bloody pulp.

The little man ducked to his left, then to his right. Blackburn spread his arms as though shooing a chicken into a coop. Then Salsoda stepped toward him, his feet shuffling swiftly. One shoulder hunched, and the gray streak of his fist traveled inside Blackburn's closing arms, driving into the paunchy middle to the wrist.

Blackburn was paralyzed for an instant by the left hook that had torn into his solar plexus. His knees sagged. His body folded forward. As the big man started to pitch onto his face, Salsoda stepped in close, clasped his hands together and brought his wrists up under the sagging chin, snapping the limp neck backward.

Salsoda continued his attack, savagely, scientifically. His right hand, open and palm downward, swept in a swift arc and struck Blackburn's Adam's apple with the noise of a dropped watermelon. Then his left elbow caught the big man's nose, turning him so that he crashed to the floor on his side.

Reaching down, Salsoda pulled the six-shooter from the holster of the unconscious man, tossed it over the bar. With a rapid movement he grasped the right wrist of his assailant, tugged, twisted and pushed.

Blackburn groaned, then shrieked. Two men jumped from the poker table, yelling for Salsoda to stop. Salsoda looked at them blankly for a moment before relaxing his stance.

"Just slowin' up his gun arm," he said tonelessly. Then his expression changed, and he looked about the room as though returning from a long journey to a once-familiar place. He stepped away from his foe's slumped figure. "I might have killed him," he whispered.

His gaze settled on the bartender.

"Sorry I made a mess on yore floor," he said, apologetically. "Such a nice clean place—hardly any bullet-holes in her yet." He sighed, his shoulders slumped, and he looked utterly weary. Then a bleak smile lit his face and he turned to Ben Evans. "I still need a match, son."

Evans held one out to him, and with a thumbnail Salsoda scratched fire to the stick, held the flame to the cigarette which had never left his mouth.

"Thanks," he drawled, spun the match toward a spittoon. "Thanks a lot, son." He turned to the poker table, hitched into his chair. "I had openers when I left," he said, and pushed a blue chip toward the center of the table.

BLACKBURN got to his feet slowly, dazed and bleeding from the nose. He grabbed his sprained wrist with his left hand, shook his head. Two Bar B cowboys crowded into the saloon, rushed up to him.

"What happened, Boss?" the taller asked.

"None of yore business," Blackburn croaked, for his larynx hurt. He swung to face the poker table. "I'll kill yuh!" He paused. "Next time I see yuh." Hate was livid on his face. "Like a dog."

Salsoda shook his head slowly. "Mighty sorry to hear that."

Blackburn turned, lurched out of the Wagon Wheel.

Ben Evans turned to Salsoda. "I don't know—I mean, I—"

Salsoda smiled. "Skip it, son. But I am lookin' for a job."

"I can use yuh on the Rockin' Chair. Start today, or any day."

Salsoda placed his cards on the table, face up, then swept the pot into his stack.

"I'm cashin', Gene," he told the dealer. Looking at the other players, he grinned. "Thank yuh kindly, boys. Thank yuh." They returned his grin.

Evans held the door open as Salsoda pocketed his winnings.

"Yore hoss?" he asked.

The little man grinned. "Traveler's at the livery stable. So's my tack. Take a minute to swap my poker shoes." He looked down at his feet, grinned again. "These used to be dancing shoes. But I'm gettin' so darn' old and ugly none of the pretty gals will dance with me. So I changed 'em to poker shoes. My boots are at the stable."

The poker dealer, standing at the bar for a quick drink, grinned. "Yuh shore made a good swap, Mr. Green," he said. "Come see us again."

Salsoda winked at Gene, stepped through the doorway. Ben Evans followed.

The bartender looked at the blood on the floor.

"The little feller really sounded sorry, didn't he, Gene?" he commented.

Before Gene could reply, Judge Ed Bailey waddled through the doorway, paused against the bar beside the gambler. A glass filled with whisky slid to a stop in front of the judge, was downed with a gulp. A flick of the judge's fingers sent it smoothly back to the bartender.

"Who beat up Blackburn?" Judge Bailey demanded.

Both the bartender and Gene shrugged. Then Gene cleared his throat.

"Blackburn was pickin' on Ben Evans," he drawled. "Then a little guy said, 'Let there be peace'." The gambler paused.

"Yeah—yeah?" Bailey snapped.

Gene lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Then peace busted out all over."

He turned away. Neither he nor the bartender liked Judge Bailey, not any more than they did the district attorney, Kenneth Crawford. Lean and taciturn, District Attorney Crawford was political boss of the area, boss of fat Judge Bailey. But Blackburn bossed them both.

"Whoever done it is going to jail," Bailey grunted. "Just as soon as our new marshal gets here—going to jail or going to tunket—depends on how 'Smoke' Tomas feels."

Gene's head jerked around. "Smoke Tomas?" he demanded, amazement in his voice. "That Colorado gunslinger?"

The poker dealer turned away in disgust. Bringing Smoke Tomas to Patagonia as marshal was death, for Smoke Tomas was a killer who lived only to kill—and killed to live. There would be dead men on the floor. . . .

Down at the livery stable Salsoda pushed into the stall beside Traveler, patted his big black gelding on the rump. The horse nosed Salsoda.

"Lonesome, old boy?" he asked, then reached into the manger to get the saddle, chaps and other gear he had left there.

When Salsoda had adjusted the saddle and bridle, he walked from the stall, Traveler following. Then, opening a saddle-bag, Salsoda pulled out a pair of boots, stamped into them. He put on his old chaps, plain leather without fringe or decoration.

AFTER that, he pulled two holstered guns from the saddle-bags, buckled them on carefully and tied down the ends of the holsters. His hands dropped to his sides, his shoulders hunched, and his hands suddenly were before him, a .44 Colt in each.

He examined one gun, then the other. Each was loaded as he had left it, guarded by Traveler as efficiently as though the horse were a watchdog. Many a livery stable man walked with a brand-new limp for disregarding Salsoda's orders to stay out of Traveler's stall.

Holstering his guns, Salsoda mounted and rode out of the stable. As soon as he was in the street, he leaned forward, and Traveler broke into a lope. There was no use wasting time in the streets of Patagonia—not with Blackburn in a killing mood. Salsoda hadn't seen anything that looked like law in the few days he had been around town. Judge Bailey, a habitual drunk, and Kenneth Crawford, the taciturn district attorney, were the sole representatives of law. The job of marshal was open. He had heard that Crawford had sent away for a man. It had all seemed a little mysterious.

Out the road about a mile he saw the dust kicked up by Ben Evans' buckboard. He had told his new boss that he would catch him in the twelve miles to the Rocking Chair spread, and he had.

At supper in the ranchhouse, Salsoda was introduced to Sid Larkin, an old cowboy who had been on the Rocking Chair since Ben's father had started ranching fifteen years before. Larkin was quietly afraid of the raucous men who worked for the Bar B, and he was interested only in turning in a month's work for a month's pay.

Nancy, Ben's young wife, was tight-lipped throughout the meal. Either she had heard enough of what had happened in the Wagon Wheel to make her nervous, or Ben had told her. She listened apprehensively each time the dogs barked, and Salsoda thought he saw tears in her eyes. It wasn't right, he figured, for a rich, ruthless man like Blackburn to make life miserable for this young couple.

After supper, Salsoda followed Larkin to the bunkhouse, sat for a while on the edge of the bunk Larkin had indicated was for him, and thoughtfully pulled clothing from his saddle-bags.

Without prompting, Larkin began the story of the spring, the water Blackburn would kill to possess.

"Ben's dad got a patent on six sections of land," Larkin explained in his tedious voice. "The spring's on the northwest section—right next to the south slope of the hill yuh see when yuh come in. An old road runs between the hill and the spring. Ain't used much, since the Bar B is closer to Patagonia by the new road. We never use that old one."

Salsoda was juggling his .44's as other men might toss balls into the air and catch them.

"Yuh're left-handed, ain't yuh?" Larkin demanded. "Yep, I can see yuh are . . . Did yuh ever know Old Ben Evans? His wife had a left-handed brother, I've heard."

Salsoda smiled. "Did she?"

Larkin was silent for a moment. "Yep, she did . . . But this here spring—whoever has it can use the summer range on the mountain behind it. And drainage from the spring irrigates the alfalfa land—not really irrigates, but makes a good crop."

Salsoda flipped his guns into their holsters, rolled a smoke.

"And if Ben loses the spring?" he suggested.

Larkin shrugged, began pulling off his worn boots.

"The Rockin' Chair'd be done."

Salsoda hitched himself to his feet and headed for the doorway.

"Think I'll take a look at Traveler 'fore I turn in," he said. " 'Night."

Outside, he sniffed the air. Peace was in it. Uneasy peace—but peace. Everything was serene on the Rocking Chair. And that was the way he intended to keep it. . . .

FOUR days of easy riding with Larkin gave Salsoda a thorough knowledge of the land ranged by Rocking Chair cattle. It was a beautiful little outfit, just large enough to make a good liv-

ing for a man and his family.

"It's just the way I expected it to look," Salsoda told Traveler as they topped a hill which gave them a view of the alfalfa land, the hay stacked from the last cutting, the shade trees and shrubs by the spring. "If they'll let us, here's where we stay."

And for a month, it seemed that Salsoda and Traveler had found a peaceful home at last. Both Ben Evans and Nancy liked him, and Larkin accepted him as foreman of the two-man crew.

Then a dynamite explosion broke the pre-dawn stillness, and echoed through the rumble of sliding earth. In a moment, the three men were in the yard, looking through the darkness toward the spring from which the rumble came.

Swiftly they saddled their horses for the half-mile ride to the spring. There, they discovered that dynamite had blown a chunk of the mountain across the road near the spring, blocking the road completely.

"I can't figger that," Evans observed, after his hasty inspection satisfied him the spring had not been harmed.

"Mebbe they figgered to run the slide across the spring," Larkin suggested.

"Mebbe," Evans agreed, and turned to Salsoda. "What do you think?"

"Don't know," Salsoda admitted. "Shore blocked the road."

They returned to the house, but after breakfast when it was lighter Evans asked Salsoda to ride to the spring with him again. As they looked over the terrain, Ben Evans tilted back his hat and scratched his head.

"I simply can't figger it."

Salsoda considered the matter a moment. "That road shore is blocked," he repeated. "But Larkin told me nobody uses it much any more."

"That's right," Evans answered. "Oh, well, we didn't do it. So it's no skin off our noses." He turned his horse for the ranch house.

Late that afternoon a horseman approached from Patagonia, waited at the house until Evans came in, handed him a legal paper and left for town. Nancy's face was tense as she watched her husband reading the paper slowly, carefully.

Salsoda, washed and ready for supper, entered the dining room.

Ben looked up at his wife. "I don't understand this," he said, then turned to Salsoda. "This paper says I got to get into town and show cause to keep the county from takin' a certain forty-foot strip of land under the community's right of eminent domain. A forty-foot strip that runs through section so-and-so, and so forth, as technical as can be."

Salsoda sighed. "Now I see it," he said wearily. "The slide blocked the old road. The community has got to have a road—or so some enemy of yores claims. The right of eminent domain is the law of the land. The community is takin' a forty-foot strip—and I'll bet my saddle the strip takes in yore spring."

Evans crushed the subpoena in his fist. "They can't do that!"

Salsoda shrugged. Nancy's face expressed the tragedy of the moment.

"But Ben," she asked, "what'll happen to us?"

Her husband shook his head, turned again to Salsoda.

"The law's the law," Salsoda said, reaching for his chair and sniffing the aroma of coffee. "But there's a lot of law. Mebbe we can think of somethin' after supper."

"I'll get a lawyer down from Phoenix," Ben Evans declared. "I'll go to the governor."

"When yuh got to appear?" Salsoda inquired softly, as he seated himself.

Ben glanced again at the paper in his hand. "Why, the dirty skunks! It's tomorrow. And the road wasn't blocked until early this mornin'."

After they had eaten, Salsoda followed Evans into the cubby-hole that was the ranch office.

"What can we do?" Ben asked.

SALSODA sat quietly for a moment. "I don't know what we can do," he said then, "but the first thing we got to do is buy some time, one way or another. Best way I can think of is for you to put in a counter writ, so to speak. Answer writ with writ. Terrible way to do things, but law's law."

"But what kind of a writ?" Evans demanded.

Salsoda looked at the ceiling. "I been away from this sort of thing for a long time," he said musingly, as his mind searched back through the years. "But I'd suggest yuh demand a writ of mandamus forcin' the road commission to repair and reestablish the road at its historic location. Yes, that should give

old Ed Bailey somethin' to think about."

Evans looked at Salsoda. "Where—" he began, then checked himself. It would be bad manners to ask a personal question. "But where do I get this writ . . . What did yuh call it?"

"Mandamus," Salsoda supplied. "It's opposite from an injunction, which stops people from doin' something. A writ of mandamus forces public officials to perform a duty. Bailey'll have to hold hearin's before he can order yuh to relinquish title to that forty-foot strip under eminent domain procedure. I think I can write a writ of mandamus for yuh. Won't be fancy, but it'll be legal. Yuh don't need many whereases and parties of the first part when yuh're in the right. . . ."

It was eight o'clock in the morning when Ben Evans and Salsoda put their horses in the livery stable at Patagonia. Salsoda tossed his saddle and chaps into the manger by Traveler's head, but did not remove his guns. He inspected them carefully, loosened them in their holsters, and followed Evans to the courthouse.

They were waiting when Judge Bailey came puffing up the walk to the building. After terse good mornings, Evans demanded a hearing date on his writ of mandamus.

Bailey started to brush it aside, but his glance caught a word or two, then he carefully read through the document.

"I don't know about this," he said hesitantly. "I just don't know."

"Pardon me, Judge," Salsoda interposed. "I witness that Ben Evans handed yuh this writ. He's goin' to ask for postponement of the action brought against him under the right of eminent domain till yuh've ruled on this mandamus, and have heard the witnesses he has a right to call."

"Yes, but—" Judge Bailey was floundering.

"If yuh don't hear Ben's pleadin's, he can have the State court upset yore local apple cart. Understand?"

Judge Bailey puffed his cheeks and snorted. "You don't need to tell me how to run my court."

"Not tellin' yuh," Salsoda interrupted. "Just remindin' yuh Ben has a witness, that we'll be here at ten o'clock, askin' for a postponement."

Salsoda turned and left the building, followed by Ben Evans.

"Yuh shore upset him," Evans said, admiration in his voice.

"He upsets easy," Salsoda drawled. "I'm more worried about the district attorney, Crawford, and—"

"And Nick Blackburn," Evans guessed. "He's the one backin' Crawford, and Crawford's backin' him."

They were approaching the Wagon Wheel.

"Want to see a feller in here," Salsoda said, thinking of Gene and the poker players who might be gathering, even though it was early.

Evans said he had to order groceries. "I'll be along to pick yuh up in time to go to court," he added, and crossed the street.

As Salsoda entered the Wagon Wheel, Judge Bailey was hurrying to Crawford's home. The Judge knocked, pushed his way into the front room.

He stopped, blinking in the semi-gloom, for three men were seated at a table. Nick Blackburn and Smoke Tomas were in conference with the district attorney.

"Well?" Crawford said to the Judge. "What's the—"

BAILEY quickly told them of the writ of mandamus.

"Oh, tear the blasted thing up!" Blackburn ordered.

Crawford nodded. "We can go ahead with our action."

"But he's got a witness," Bailey countered. "They can get my ruling reversed."

"What witness?" Blackburn demanded, springing to his feet.

"That little hombre who near beat you to death," Bailey said recklessly.

The big rancher stiffened, rage twisting his face. He turned to Smoke Tomas.

"That's the one—name of Green." Blackburn's thick lips made an ugly smile as he turned again to the judge. "Evans just thinks he's got a witness. Smoke Tomas has been paid to take care of Green."

The slender gunman lifted himself to his feet. He was tall and tanned, his face reckless in its insolence, arrogant in its ruthless confidence.

"Yuh want it done before or after the hearin'?" he asked, his voice startlingly low and mild.

Crawford's fingers drummed the table. "I don't want to hear any more

talk about this. Settle the details outside." He motioned to the door.

Smoke Tomas smiled again, and said to Blackburn, "Will yuh introduce me to this Green? I don't want to depopulate Patagonia, hopin' to get the right man."

Blackburn gritted his teeth. He could read the contempt in the gunman's cold gray eyes, contempt mingled with amusement that anyone should show fear.

"Bailey," the rancher ordered, "you show Smoke which one's Green."

The fat judge hastened through the doorway.

"So long, gents," Smoke drawled as his eyes flicked over the crooked attorney and the rancher. "Shouldn't be more'n a couple of minutes."

Bailey hurried down the street. He was afraid the shooting might start as soon as he pointed out the victim to the cold-blooded killer whose catlike strides effortlessly carried him to the grim rendezvous.

Salsoda was standing at the bar, chatting with Gene when Bailey, followed by Smoke Tomas, pushed through the swinging doors. Without a word, Gene hurried around the end of the bar, picked up a sawed-off shotgun. Salsoda watched him with surprise, then turned to face the men who had entered.

"That's him," Bailey said, pointing to Salsoda, then hurried from the Wagon Wheel.

Smoke Tomas stood carelessly at ease, smiling faintly as his gaze locked with Salsoda's.

"I might have guessed," he drawled. "But I'd heard yuh was dead—shot in the back in El Paso. I might have known it was Salsoda Green." He shrugged.

The smile left Salsoda's lips. "It's that way, is it?"

Smoke nodded. "I'm marshal here." He sighed. "Might as well get it over," he said, and as he spoke his eyes took on the stony stare of a rattlesnake poised to strike.

"Not in here," a voice commanded. It was Gene's, and he held the shotgun centered on Smoke's chest. "Move for yore gun, and I'll blow yuh apart."

The tenseness left Smoke's body, an indolent smile touched his lips.

"Yuh're almost resistin' an officer," he drawled. "I'll look into that later." He shifted his glance from the gambler to Salsoda. "He just don't understand, I reckon. But you know how it's got to be—one or the other . . . I'll be comin' back down the street in about ten minutes. So long."

He waved his hand, turned, and went out into the street.

As the doors quit swinging, the gambler uncocked his shotgun, set it back on its pegs with a thump. He moved down the bar and stood in front of Salsoda.

"I wouldn't have sent for yuh," Gene said earnestly, "if I'd known this would happen. I figgered yuh'd just have Blackburn on yore hands."

Salsoda sighed. "Don't worry, Gene. Smoke and I had to meet some time, I reckon. Either here or in the hereafter." His voice was weary, and he carefully rolled a cigarette.

AS Smoke Tomas reached the sidewalk he saw Bailey's bulky figure hurrying back to Crawford's house. A smile of pure amusement lit his face, and for a moment he lost the expression of a killer. He wanted a few words with both Bailey and Blackburn. Ten minutes might be all the time he would ever have.

He didn't knock when he reached the door, but pushed it open contemptuously.

"Well?" Blackburn growled. "Well?"

Smoke's smile changed to a sardonic grin. "Well?" he mocked. "I don't blame yuh for bein' scared. That hombre's Salsoda Green. *Salsoda.* Get it? Didn't yuh ever hear of Salsoda Green?"

The three men shook their heads.

"It'd serve you pikers right if I'd pull out and let him chase the three of yuh to Mexico."

Fear spread over the faces of the three men. "You mean," Crawford began, "you may not be able to—to carry out your contract?"

Smoke Tomas nodded.

Blackburn jumped to his feet. "I'll be yore deputy! I'll get him from the side, plug him before he goes for his gun."

Smoke turned his eyes on Blackburn, and for a moment it seemed he was going to draw and kill the blustering rancher.

"Why didn't yuh shoot him in the back, in the first place?" Smoke demanded. "It would have been cheaper than hirin' me." There was bitterness and self-contempt in his voice. "And hanged

if I'd go through with it, even now, if I hadn't spent part of the money you paid me in advance. It's not," he added hastily, "that I can't kill him. I can. He's old now. Slowed up."

Smoke dragged the makings from his pocket, quietly and steadily rolled a cigarette.

"The ten minutes are about up, I reckon." He lit his cigarette, blew smoke into Blackburn's face. "So long, yuh smellin' lobos. See yuh in a few minutes —or in perdition."

He turned and left the room, beginning his slow walk down the street.

Blackburn was the first of the three to recover.

"Quick!" he said to Crawford. "Where's the back door?"

"But," the attorney protested, "what—"

"Think we can take a chance?" Blackburn broke in. "I'll get down the alley. If Smoke Tomas kills Green, everything's all right. If Green kills Smoke, I'll get Green. I'll be upholdin' the law." His evil laugh rumbled. "Ain't that so, Judge?"

Bailey nodded, and Crawford led the way through the kitchen.

"Don't make a mistake, Blackburn," he warned. "After all, some people around here want real justice."

"The devil with 'em," Blackburn sneered, and hurried through the doorway. . . .

The clock ticked slowly in the Wagon Wheel. Every few seconds, Gene glanced at it, then back to Salsoda.

"Don't yuh want a drink, man?"

Salsoda shook his head, smiled. "Later, if I'm not too full of holes." Grim amusement had replaced the sadness in his voice. He threw his cigarette aside. "Yuh should quit trying to fill so many straights, Gene," he told the dealer quietly, grinned, and stepped out into the sunlight.

Glancing toward the courthouse, he saw the lithe figure moving serenely down the center of the street toward him. Salsoda loosened his guns again, walked into the street and waited.

All the world seemed in slow motion. The dust spurting in small clouds from beneath Smoke Tomas' boots moved lazily. A horse at the hitching rack in front of the grocery store switched his tail at a fly. And all the while tension was building up inside Salsoda, the cold tension of a coiled spring.

Smoke's strides slowed when fifty yards separated the two men, slowed and shortened so that he was always in perfect balance, ready to jerk either gun from its worn holster and have it smoking before a man could bat an eye. His hat brim threw a shadow across his face, but Salsoda saw a smile on Smoke's thin lips, a sardonic smile such as a gambler might wear when he bets his bottom chip.

SALSODA'S face was expressionless, relaxed. From the corner of his eye he caught the impression of a blurred figure in the alley to his left—a man, perhaps, who had come to see the duel, as others had been drawn by the message swiftly spread throughout the town by the tenuous grapevine. He knew, too, that Ben Evans stood on the porch of the grocery store to his right. But he forced these impressions from his mind, for death was walking slowly down the street to meet him.

The distance between the two was reduced now to fifty feet, and Salsoda's shoulders sagged a fraction of an inch, as the shoulders of a tired old man might sag. The smile on Smoke's face changed subtly.

Without a break in stride, Smoke whipped his right hand to the ivory butt of his six-shooter, dragged it smoothly from the leather as his thumb jabbed back the hammer to send a bullet crashing toward Salsoda.

But as Smoke's gun roared, a .44 slug tore into his throat, for Salsoda had read the tightening of the killer's lips, had seen the tenseness of the right thumb that betrayed the coming draw. His own left hand had flicked his Colt as his body lurched violently to the right, his swift reflexes throwing him from the line of fire.

He had known he must do this if he hoped to stay alive, for no man was swift enough to down Smoke Tomas before Smoke could fire at least one shot. He'd had to make him miss.

As Salsoda's body hit the ground, other guns roared, above them a shotgun blast. Hot pain tore along Salsoda's ribs, then the street was still. Gingerly the little man picked himself from the dusty street, his right hand exploring his bleeding side.

Evans was running toward him.

"Did he hit yuh?" Ben demanded. "Blackburn, the skunk, was shootin' at yore back. He'd have killed yuh if it hadn't been for Gene."

Salsoda looked around. The figure he had noticed—Blackburn—from the corner of his eye before the shooting started was now sprawled half on the board sidewalk, half in the alley. Gene, cradling his shotgun, leaned against the building, a thin smile on his lips. Salsoda jerked his thumb toward the body.

"Blackburn," Gene said tersely. "Had his gun out before Smoke started his draw. He was tryin' to kill yuh."

Salsoda grinned, thrust his gun into its holster.

"Thanks, Gene," he said, then added, "goin' to need some hoss liniment on these ribs."

AS he spoke he moved to the side of Smoke's body, looked at it briefly, then turned away. His expression showed infinite sadness. Then his slow strides took him to the alley.

"Thanks, Gene," he repeated.

"Least I could do," the gambler told him, and turned toward the Wagon Wheel. "Think yuh need some patchin' up," he added, speaking over his shoulder. "Come on."

Inside the Wagon Wheel, Gene opened Salsoda's shirt.

"Be as good as new in a week," he said, after a quick examination. He motioned to a chair. "Take a load off yore boots."

Salsoda grinned his thanks, turned to Ben Evans, who had followed him into the saloon.

"Son," Salsoda said, "some big changes are taking place in local politics. Send word to Crawford I want to see him ridin' to Nogales within fifteen minutes, or he'll be holding hands with Smoke Tomas on their way to Hades tonight. . . And Ed Bailey better lope along, too."

Evans was silent for a moment.

"Do what yore uncle says," Gene told him.

"Uncle!" Ben Evans' voice exploded in amazement. "Then you must be Mother's brother! I thought—"

Salsoda nodded. "Lots of people thought I was—or hoped it." A grin lit up his face. "Go tell them hombres to get moving, son. They're a blot on our fair community."

Salsoda grinned again as Evans passed through the doorway to the street, glanced at the clock ticking quietly on the wall. There would be no session of court, no hearing on the writ of mandamus, no bother with eminent domain. The troubles of Evans were over.

A meadowlark lilted its song from the vacant lot next door. Salsoda looked at the faces circling the chair on which he sat. The eyes were friendly. The world was full of peace.

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from Page 7)

steer roping, Everett Shaw; bareback bronc riding, Bill Linderman; bull riding, Gerald Roberts; calf roping, Buck Sorrells; team tying, Chuck Sheppard; contract performers, Verne Goodrich.

E. Weisel, rodeo producer of Clear Lake, South Dakota, was in Florida in March buying Brahma cattle for his rodeos. It is said that Chip Morris, Fred and Chip Clancy will be identified with the Weisel rodeos this summer.

Friends of Buck and Carroll Dowell, who for a number of years have been with the JE Ranch Rodeo, will be glad to know that Carroll has practically recovered from her recent illness. They have been spending the winter at Forth Worth, Texas, and it is reported that Carroll now weighs 130 pounds. Mrs. Dowell, or Carroll as she is known to thousands of her friends, is not only a clever trick rider but is an artist whose sketches of Western life have attracted considerable attention.

Arizona Events

The recent Tucson, Arizona, Rodeo was an excellent show and entertained thousands of visitors and tourists. It's the big midwinter affair of that section of the southwest. The stock contractors were Andy Jauregui, Otho Kinsley and Bob Barmby. Judges were Jackie Coper and Clay Carr. The arena director was Earl Thode and the arena secretary Gwen Jordan. Timers were Kermit Lewis and John Jordan, and the announcer Gene Payne.

The final results in calf roping were: First, Troy Fort; Second, Jack Skipworth; Third, Perry Franks; Fourth, Clay Carr. Dub Taylor won the steer wrestling, Tater Decker was second, Barney Willis was third and Bill Rogers was fourth. Kenny Madland copped the bronc riding, Bart Clennon was second, Ross Dollarhide was third and Gene Pruett was fourth.

Spike Bronson was best man in the bull riding, Buck Royce was second, Dude Smith was third, Charlie Davis was fourth, Jack Little was fifth, and Bud Watson and Joel Sublette split sixth.

The Chandler, Arizona, Rodeo was a good show. The final results in calf roping were: First, Fred Darnell; Second, Homer Pettigrew; Third, Claude Henson; Fourth, Jim Brister.

Lee Roberts won the steer wrestling, Vern Castro was second, Stan Gomez was third, and Billy Hogue, fourth. Lee Roberts copped the bronc riding, Red McDowell was second, Laurel Ives was third, Chuck Sheppard was fourth, Buck Bovey was fifth, and Johnny Tubbs was sixth.

Chuck Utterback was best man in the bull riding, Horace Hitchcock was second, Fritz Becker was third, Buttons Leach was fourth, Jim Reed was fifth, Richard Winning was sixth, and Casey Tibbs was seventh. Don Boag was tops in bareback bronc riding, Jim Hailey was second, Tommy Cahoe was third, Jimmy Davis fourth, Chuck Haas, fifth, and Earle Davis sixth.

Summer Rodeos

Here are some rodeos this summer that should attract attention of tourists going west!

Nampa, Idaho, Snake River Stampede, July 13th to 16th. Paul V. Nash is secretary. A nice section for a vacation. Here is located Lakeview Park, containing warm water swimming and wading pools, a large natural amphitheater, a pitch and putt golf course, tennis courts and playground equipment. Twenty miles south of Nampa, and a little west, is Givens' Hot Springs. The springs are on the south shore of the Snake River, and on the north side of the river are several fine groups of Indian Rock writings, including Map Rock, on which is carved a detailed map of the Snake River drainage area. This is one of the most remarkable Indian pictograph discoveries ever made.

Rapid City, South Dakota, Black Hills Range Days, July 15th to 17th. Located on the eastern border of the Black Hills. Rapid City was founded in 1876 two years after gold was discovered in the Black Hills. It is the tourist headquarters of that section of the country. From Skyline Drive within the city one can get exceptional views of the surrounding scenery. The drive passes Dinosaur Park, which contains life-size reproductions of five prehistoric animals. The animals are constructed of steel and painted in natural colors. Other attractions are Black Hills Reptile Gardens, Federal Sioux Indian Museum, Wild Cat Cave, Canyon Lake, Stage Barn Crystal Caverns, Petrified Forest and other scenic wonders.

Cheyenne, Wyoming, Frontier Days, July 26th to 30th. Cheyenne was founded in 1867, and occupies a rolling plain at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Its rodeo is the oldest in the United States, having been organized in 1897 and having run annually since, and has attracted more notables among its spectators than any other rodeo in America.

Cripple Creek, Colorado, August 6th and 7th. The town once famous as a gold mining camp is still a mining town, reached through Ute Pass and around Pike's Peak. The famous Phantom Canyon connects Cripple Creek with Canon City, a nice little rodeo midst picturesque settings, but don't expect to find a large city. The population of Cripple Creek is less than 3,000.

Optimist Clubs Show

The Optimist Clubs Championship Rodeo, staged in the Orange Bowl, at Miami, Florida, recently, was a very good show, and while it never filled the huge Bowl which is estimated to seat around 65,000, it drew good crowds and was successful financially. G. C. Troup was the producer, Vic Blackstone, arena director, Ralph Collier and Bill Parks judges, Chip Morris announcer, Mrs. Tom Kirby arena secretary, and Mary Parks timer.

Specialty acts included Jack Andrews and his trained Brahma bull "Henry," Chip Morris and his horse "Black Fox," Alabama Slim and his trained mule "Bette Davis," Red Simpson and his high school horse "Cherry," Peaches King and Jack Andrews in Australian bullwhip popping. The fancy ropers, making horse catches, were Frank Biron, Dave Nimmo, and Fred Clancy. Fancy rope spinners were Dave Nimmo, Fred Clancy, Bobby Boulter, Peaches King, Chip Clancy, and Frank Biron.

The clown was Alabama Slim. Trick riders included Bobby Boulter, Nellie Rogers, Fay Blackstone, Peaches King, Marie Simpson, Deloris Nimmo, Chip Clancy, Ethel Nimmo, Doris Morris, Dave Nimmo, and Alabama Slim.

The final results in calf roping were: First, Vic Blackstone; second, Odis Cowart; Third, E. Pardee; Fourth, Claude Tindall. Jack Yale won the bronc riding, John Stewart was second, Howard Crouch was third and Claude Tindall was fourth. Pete Baker copped the bull riding, Dickey Dyer was

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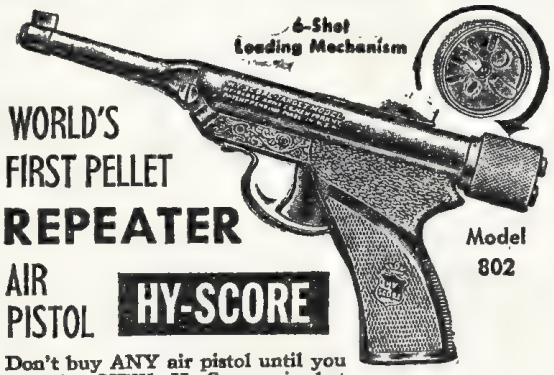

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second, Glen McKinney was third, and Homer Harris was fourth. Curley Hatchell was best man in the steer wrestling, Vic Blackstone was second, Glen Murphy was third, Bobby Boulter fourth, Trig Mansfield fifth, Dickey Dyer sixth, Howard Crouch seventh, and Bill Sampson eighth.

The JE Ranch Rodeo

The JE Ranch Rodeo played Charlotte, North Carolina, under auspices of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, recently, and while the nights were a little too cool for an outside show to be comfortable, which cut down the anticipated attendance some, the show drew crowds enough to make it successful.

Col. Jim Eskew was the producer and arena director, Ralph Collier and Bill Parks judges, Bob Matthews arena secretary, Mary Parks and Louise Mefford timers, and Clay Hockman announcer.

Among the special acts were Rudenoff's Balareno Horses, Jim Eskew, Jr., in a special platform rope spinning act, John Crethers and his mule "Mickey Mouse," Rex Rossi and his Quarter horse Roman jumping team, and the Marvin Hoover Family with their bucking Ford.

In the horse catches in fancy roping there were Buddy Mefford, Rex Rossi and Jim Eskew, Jr. The trick riders were Jimmy Miller, Rex Rossi, Bobby Boulter, Betty Thomas, Eva Rogers, Beryl Jackson, Francis Sparks, and Madonna Eskew. The clowns and bullfighters were Jimmy Miller, Brahma Rogers and Frank Merrill.

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: First, Paul Gould; Second, Manuel Enos; Third, Jimmy Miller; Fourth, G. K. Lewallen. Pat Parker won the calf roping, Jim Snively was second, Ralph Collier was third and Buddy Mefford was fourth. Cotton Proctor copped the saddle bronc riding, G. K. Lewallen was second, Paul Gould was third, and Earl Walter fourth. Cotton Proctor was best man in the

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bull riding, Homer Harris was second, Jim Cross was third and G. K. Lewallen fourth.

Jack Jackson won the steer wrestling, Chuck Dent was second, Mike Fisher was third, and Buck Dowell was fourth. The fastest steer was thrown by Mike Fisher in 3.5 seconds, Steve Heacock downed one in four seconds flat, and Jack Jackson bedded one down in 5.1. The fastest calf was tied by Pat Parker in 14.6 seconds.

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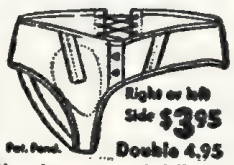

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for strong emotional appeal. It is called THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB and it is by one of the best-known western writers of all, Frank C. Robertson. Here's the situation:

In the wild country of Bobcat Basin, which was much like the Jackson Hole country, there was a little community of ex-outlaws, trying desperately to go straight and make a living on their small spreads.

These men had once been under the leadership of the notorious "Bobcat Bob", a legendary outlaw who had disappeared mysteriously, leaving only a son, Bob, who knew nothing of his father's whereabouts.

Most people believed Bobcat Bob was dead. But there were rumors that he had gone to South America and that he had been killed there in a revolution. There were other rumors that he had been seen in Mexico or Cuba, or other far places.

Young Bob grew up with an old half-breed outlaw named Isom Dark. When he was thirteen a letter came from his father, proving the old outlaw was not dead. As a result of this letter, Bob Paradise was sent off to Denver to be educated and to live at the home of an aunt. He was gone from Bobcat Basin ten years. He returned as Robert Martin, twenty-three years old, a very different man from the boy who had left the outlaw stronghold, yet somehow the same. He was returning for one strong reason. His father had been pardoned and was coming home to Bobcat Basin.

There was a tie between young Bob and his father. Perhaps it was, at this stage, more curiosity than anything else. For Bobcat Bob was already a figure as noted as Jesse James. Books had been written about

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him—books which young Bob had read in secret because his aunt did not approve.

But this was only Bob's personal affair. The crisis came at the same time as the announcement that the old outlaw was returning home.

Big cattlemen of the area had long eyed the unspoiled country of Bobcat Basin. There was a powerful and wealthy man named Herman Edge, who not only coveted Bobcat Basin, but felt he had a moral right to it. These squatters were outlaws, were without legal rights. Who was going to stop him from moving in and taking over their basin?

The outlaw community was at once faced with the problem of opposing Herman Edge's gunmen without violence, since if they fought back it would bring the full weight of the law down upon them.

It was into this devil's nest of impending

[*Turn Page*]

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violence that young Bob returned, to meet the full responsibility of the problem and to meet at the same time, a father he had never seen.

This is a story that has power—the power not only of brutal action, but of men's love for their homes, of their loyalty to each other, of their agony of decision. It's a story that will linger in your mind long after you've finished it.

For change of pace, and as comic relief after the long novel, we recommend SILVER CARSON ENTERTAINS, the new story in the hilarious Sandstone series by Francis H. Ames.

Silver Carson, you will remember, is Sandstone's dignified mayor and most honored citizen. When Mayor Carson entertains a visiting eastern capitalist who is thinking of building a brickyard either in Sandstone or Gumbo Flats, the fun begins. The citizens of Sandstone decide it is up to them to impress capitalist Buford with their refinement and elegance so he will choose Sandstone over Gumbo Flats for his brickyard.

Knothole Dobbs becomes an Irish chauffeur, his brother Highpockets a French chef and Curly Ransome becomes the English butler—complete in a Civil War uniform. When these addle-pated rannies start serving dignified grub to Mr. and Mrs. Buford, the result is just about what you'd expect—and we are not responsible for any lost buttons or side-split shirts. The Sandstone folk may not be the looniest ever put on paper, but if there are any loonier, we can't think of them right now. There's a laugh a line in this new Sandstone opus, so don't miss it.

Continuing John A. Thompson's series on western guns and western hunting, we have GRIZZLIES MEAN BUSINESS. Which same is a serious discussion of the habits of the big brother of all bears, the grizzly and his closely related cousin, the Alaska Brown Bear. "For sheer, goose-bump suspense," writes author Thompson, "there

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

●

THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

is nothing that quite comes up to tackling a grizzly on the loose."

We agree. Especially when you consider that grizzlies run to 1200 pounds of concentrated ferocity and uncertain temper and that Alaska Browns tip the scales at a mere 1800 pounds, which makes them just about the biggest carnivores around. For that kind of baby you need plenty of gun. And Mr. Thompson, with the cool, calm, collected air of an expert, discusses the guns for grizzlies and takes up the living habits of the critters so expertly that you feel as if you've been living right with them.

This is the kind of thing no red-blooded outdoor man would want to miss—one of the most popular series we've run in WEST.

Finally, there's a new Zorro adventure —ZORRO GIVES EVIDENCE, which should bring joy to the thousands of Zorro fans.

Zorro finds himself in a bit of a predicament as a stranger is arrested and accused of being Zorro. With the biased court then in power, this innocent man was in danger of being summarily hung on the flimsiest of evidence. Zorro had no desire to see him hung, furthermore his pride was hurt at the thought that the people might think that the real Zorro had been so easily caught and executed. It was up to him, not only to save the innocent victim, but to demonstrate quite unforgettably that Zorro—the real Zorro—was very much alive and just as dangerous to evil-doers as ever.

To accomplish this it was necessary for Zorro to storm the very courtroom, guarded as it was by soldiers. Always alone, the master outlaw had only his wits and nimble sword blade to pit against the whole ponderous machinery of Spain's law. A swashbuckling story, colorful with the sights and sounds of old California and the ring of clashing sword-blades.

Those are just the featured stories in next issue's WEST. In addition we round out the bill with selected shorts by our top-flight western authors, Foghorn Clancy's CHUCK

[*Turn Page*]

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THE MAIL BAG

OWEN WISTER once wrote a book called "When West Was West". And WEST magazine sure goes WEST. At least one copy went west clear to China, for we got a postcard from a destroyer in the U.S. Navy out there:

Your magazine really gets around. The fellows out here in China enjoy all westerns but think WEST has them all topped. We especially liked WAR ON BIG MUDDY in the March, 1949 issue.
—"O" Division, USS Wiltsie, c/o FPO, San Francisco.

That's quite a thought, you know? Picture a bunch of blue-clad sailors straddling the pitching deck of a destroyer on the China seas, reading about cowpunchers straddling the pitching deck of a snorting, bawling bronc. Who was the lad who said something about the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence? Anyway, thanks a heap, Division "O," for them kind words.

I have been reading WEST since it was first published. I enjoy the other stories but Zorro is the one that keeps me buying the magazine. How about another long Zorro novel?
—James R. Hunt, Schenectady, N. Y.

Another long Zorro novel is something to think about. Of course, such a job has to be planned in advance because of publishing schedules. And we already have a number of good novels lined up for forthcoming issues. But in the meantime, there will be Zorro stories coming in regularly for the vast army of loyal Zorro fans, and as well-rounded a collection of stories as we can find to keep you happy.

I haven't seen anybody mention it so thought I would put in my two cents, better late than never, about WALL OF SILENCE by Steuart Emery. There, I think is the best story WEST has ever published. It makes up for a lot of duds that come through every once in a while. Let's have more of Steuart Emery.
—Jack C. Gardner, Tucson, Ariz.

Funny thing about this "dud" business, Jack. No one reader is going to like every

story in the magazine. What's a dud to you the next fellow raves about. And he doesn't like the one you like. That's why we have a letter department. And why we invite you folks to dust off the old ball point pen and write us a card or letter. We don't mind beefs, we like to know what's on your mind. And if it's a compliment, why, shucks, we're modest and we blush easy, but nobody ever died from it, as the saying goes.

But we agree with Jack about Steuart Emery, who writes a mighty flavorful yarn, with plenty of good gripping suspense. There'll be more Emerys from time to time.

And that about winds us up for this time, *amigos*. Don't forget to write us. Just drop a line to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N.Y. Thanks, everybody!

—The Editor

The Code of an OWLHOOTER!

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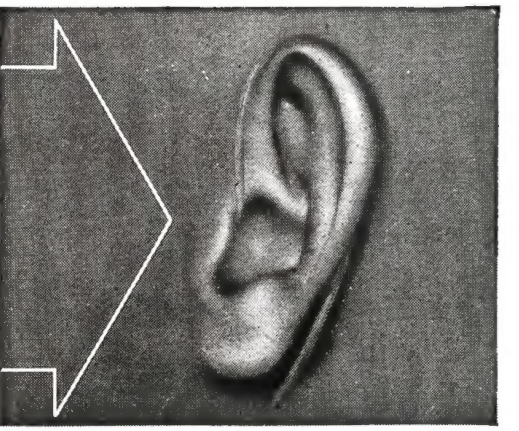

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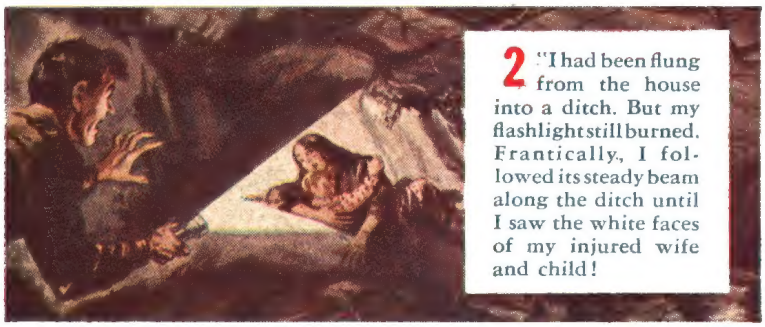
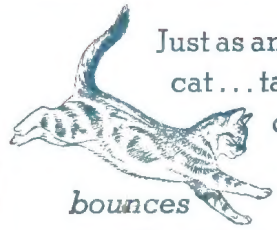


2 "I had been flung from the house into a ditch. But my flashlight still burned. Frantically, I followed its steady beam along the ditch until I saw the white faces of my injured wife and child!

3 "With the help of our flashlight, we reached shelter. I thank those flashlight batteries for saving three lives that night. Now I know why 'Eveready' batteries are The Batteries With 'Nine Lives'!"



Just as an active cat . . . takes a cat nap . . . and *bounces back* with new pep . . . so "Eveready" flashlight batteries recover power * between uses and *bounce back* for *extra life!*

* *Technical explanation:* due to the electrochemical regeneration of the depolarizer.

THE FLASHLIGHT BATTERY WITH "NINE LIVES"!

"Eveready," "Nine Lives" and the Cat Symbol are trade-marks of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

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Write us about your true experiences with "Eveready" batteries. Address Dept. C.